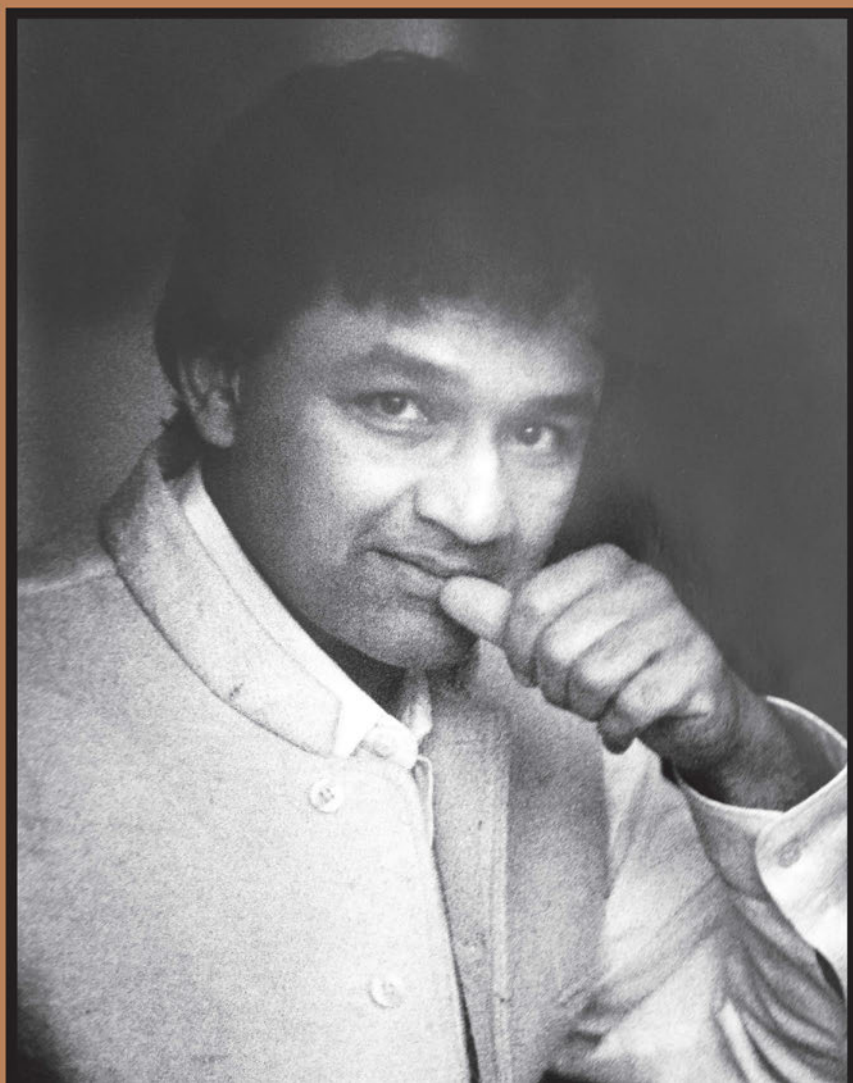


U N D E R D I S C U S S I O N

Mad Heart Be Brave

Essays on the Poetry of Agha Shahid Ali

Edited by Kazim Ali



MAD HEART BE BRAVE

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Mad Heart Be Brave

Essays on the Poetry of Agha Shahid Ali

Edited by Kazim Ali

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KAZIM ALI

Introduction

Agha Shahid Ali's poetry traveled a trajectory throughout his life from sense to sound. Though always musical, his earlier books were grounded in confessional experience and narrative, but moved book by book as if spoken by an angel with a forked tongue: pure strangeness and pure lucidity at once, textural music and linear narrative both. *The Nostalgist's Map of America* is probably his hinge moment; a narrative of a road trip across the country coupled with a re-telling of that myth of crazy love, Layla and Majnoon, it marked a stark departure from free verse into the various forms that Shahid worked in throughout the last three books he published. Form, for Shahid, was less about stricture and more about detecting some shape that lingered in the formlessness of sound in a poem. It was like the act of naming constellations, first seeing those unshaped frames of light.

Agha Shahid Ali said something very interesting about the ghazal, likening it to something that was happening in Modernist poetry: "When my students ask about a poem such as *The Waste Land*—How does it hold together?—I suggest a more compelling approach: How does it *not* hold together?"

Indeed, for some of us our life does not hold together. The disparate parts do not find a thematic unity. How can one make art to describe a life like this? Interestingly, the question has added significance to the Muslim artist, as classical Islamic art eschews representation, and also eschews a sense of the artistic production (book, painting, building) as an object with senses of either linearity or completeness. Man, after all, is *not* the measure of all things.

There was a language I spoke but another language with which I tried to write. In a sense it was the language I was trying to write with that was closer to my heart—a language that wouldn't fly in daily life, couldn't be used to buy the groceries, check books and videos out from the library, pick up the mail and send packages. There was also for me an anxiety about the

vocabulary of images: how could I use poetically a metaphor or image for which potential readers might have no cultural referents at all?

It hard to believe that is has been fifteen years since Agha Shahid Ali has been among us, writing poems. I had tried very hard to please him with my poetry back in my student days and though he always encouraged me, I could always tell he was just waiting—*waiting*—for me to do *better*. Shahid, with his deep zest and passion for love—and being loved—would have adored life as a poet in 2015, I think. And it would have adored him! And I would have adored having him, stern taskmaster, whip me into shape.

Indeed his devotion to teaching marks the pages of the essays in this book. Many of the authors of them were his students or expressed to me privately how much they wish they were. His approach to teaching was the same as his approach to poetry—passionate, exacting, madcap. Sejal Shah provides a beautiful and illuminating account of learning from Shahid in her essay and *very* generously allowed us to reproduce some poems of hers that Shahid marked up, showing precisely his approach to poetry and teaching both.

Ali had a transnational youth, being born in India but later coming to America as a young boy while his father studied for his PhD at Ball State and then returning to India for his studies before settling in the United States for good. While in India he published several books with the co-operative Writers Workshop. Most of these early poems are not available in the United States and were not included in his collected poems. Rita Banerjee takes a look at these early poems and charts the young poet's development as well as his involvement in the independent publishing scene in India.

These senses of transnationality and alienation were explored by Ali in his first US book, *The Half-Inch Himalayas*. Many years later he exchanged a set of postcards with poet Anthony Hecht, one of his influences. Amanda Golden went into the archives and unearthed several of these postcards and presents an examination of the correspondence.

Shahid went then to the open spaces of the Southwest to study poetry at the University of Arizona. While there he wrote a book called *A Walk through the Yellow Pages* that feels unique among his canon for its lighthearted tone and obsessions with

pop culture. It was published in a limited edition and never reprinted in his lifetime. Ravi Shankar looks at this book and also Shahid's other work to show us how wit and humor suffused all levels of his poetry. Two essays that follow, by Abin Chakraborty and Amy Newman, explore the external pressures on Shahid's work, thinking about the geographic, geopolitical, and social dimensions of the formally rigorous and thematically expansive later books.

In Agha Shahid Ali's poem "Dear Shahid," he imagines a friend in war-torn Kashmir writing to him about the condition of life and bodies. The image of a country without peace is told in the metaphors of modern technology—radios and televisions being smashed by the soldiers—and the ultimate demonstration of barbarism is that the post office is not longer delivering mail. Poetry, however, becomes a way of expressing those hopes for peace—in fact, the unnamed correspondent finds a letter to Ali in the abandoned post office and has included it in the envelope with the note that we, the readers, are perusing.

At the heart of this short five-paragraph poem is the story of two young men, both affected violently by the war. Rizwan, a friend of the narrator's, named after the mythic guardian of the gates of paradise, has been killed. The second young man—a stranger—has had the webs of hands cut during torture. The tales of these two, one an intimate and the other a stranger, come to stand for all the violence perpetuated against bodies in a time war, and the brutality of war itself as compared to the boons of peace, the ordinary, small parts of our daily lives like receiving the mail or listening to the radio. The correspondent is desperate to hold on to this quotidian life—in the midst of his recounting the story of the torture of the second young man, he interrupts himself like so:

"Yesterday at Hideout Café (everyone there asks about you), a doctor—who had just treated a sixteen-year old boy released from an interrogation center—said: I want to ask the fortune-tellers: Did anything in his line of Fate reveal that the webs of his hand would be cut with a knife?"¹

Through the interruptions we come to see the full texture of the experience of the individual body in a culture divided by war—though the news is dire and political, the social nature of the indi-

vidual relationship always also still exists. The hands, cut violently here, return as a prayer in the closing image: "We are waiting for the almond blossoms. And, if God wills, O! those days of peace when we all were in love and the rain was in our hands wherever we went."

The image of the rain in the hands is so soothing, so lovely, compared to the lancing image of the webs of the hands sliced, but it mirrors also an image in the first paragraph of men forced to stand all night barefoot in snow. There is the tenderest of motions back and forth within the small prose text; it is itself an imagined missive, addressed to the man who is writing it himself. The lost letter with the text becomes a cipher for loneliness and alienation, but also the sign of hope: it has been sent—the poem has been written—after all, against the odds.

The hinge movement that I mentioned earlier toward a more formal approach to poetry is explored by Christopher Merrill in his essay.

As his poetics began to shift, Ali's correspondence with Hecht and other formalists and neoformalists (he would later refuse to be labeled either as a formalist or a neoformalist, in an essay included in Annie Finch's anthology *After New Formalism*) became increasingly important. Foremost among these was a correspondence and friendship with James Merrill, which Jason Schneiderman explores in his essay.

Like his friend, James Merrill, whose poem "Charles on Fire," with its saturation of nautical imagery, he admired very much, Ali was interested in building a conceit in a poem and then exploring every possible metaphor associated with it. In his poem "Resume," he uses the language of business in a poem about a speaker who wants to achieve union with the condition of water, that is to say eternity. "I/an applicant/to the water's green offices/sign my name above a thin horizon,"² the poem opens. To him, the manifestations of the divine on Earth, temples and mosques, are "postscripts on God." The speaker wants more than these mere reflections, but unfortunately for him, "those who promised/to recommend me// place the moon's blank sheets/in my hands unsigned."

The speaker is left with only "xeroxed rumors" as the "clerk of climates" tears up his forms and tell him, "no opening he says/no vacant reflection." The speaker is given only the ghost of a chance which he jumps at: "Maybe he says Maybe—and I say Yes." He is invited then to join the water's offices, not completely, but at the

most entry-level position: “I the secretary of memory/in chambers of weeds//the water’s breathless bureaucracy.” Ultimately, Ali relishes the world-play and game-play of the conceit certainly, but it’s purpose is not frivolous; he uses it to turn all the screws and increase the emotional tension of the speaker’s search.

Ali’s next book, *The Country without a Post Office*, the book in which the poem “Dear Shahid” appeared, is considered by many to be his masterwork. Raza Ali Hasan, Stephen Burt, and Syed Humayoun each take apart the thorny issues that surround Ali’s engagement with the political conflict of Kashmir. Kashmiri writer Feroz Rather offers a lyrical reflection of the landscape that haunts this book—the urban spaces of Srinagar.

One of Shahid’s main contributions to contemporary poetry was a joyful embrace of writing in poetic form while simultaneously being free of the political and artistic baggage that might ordinary be seen to come from such an aesthetic allegiance. In addition to revitalizing interest in forms like the villanelle, pantoum and sestina, he played a groundbreaking role in bringing what he called “real ghazals” into English. In a series of essays that follow several aspects of Shahid’s formal and thematic concerns are explored more fully.

The sometimes over-performance of narrative voice in these poems is not really melodramatic the way an American ear might hear it, but rather is characteristic of that baroque and nearly overwrought sense of the poetic sublime that is the norm in Urdu poetry. In a sequence of poems entitled “From Amherst to Kashmir,” he tells the story of accompanying his mother’s body back to India for burial during the month of Muhurram, the first month of the Muslim calendar, but also commemorated by Shi’a Muslims as the month of mourning, in which Hussain, grandson of the prophet and spiritual leader of the Shi’a at the time, was killed by the ruling Caliph, along with much of his extended family. In the poems, he tries the link the historical story of Karbala, the place Hussain was killed, with his grief at losing his mother. In fact, throughout the sequence—Zainab’s loss of her brother Hussain at Karbala, Ali’s mother’s identification with Zainab’s grief, Ali’s own grief at the passing of famed ghazal singer Bhegum Akhtar (a grief he revisits in poem after poem throughout his career)—multiple losses are conflated with the overarching loss Ali feels at the passing of his mother.

Unlike his mother, who was able to make her grief a part of her

daily experience, the poet is nearly overcome by it: “But for me, I who of passion/always make a holocaust, will there be a summer of peace?”³ As the month of mourning commences and Ali begins his journey back to Kashmir, there is no peace offered: “It is Muharram again./Of God there is no sign./Mother,/you are “the breath drawn after every line.” Throughout the ensuing poems—pantoums, Sapphic stanzas, ghazals, and villanelles—lines of Zainab’s lament, translated as the second part of the sequence, are sprinkled through, calling to mind the role of grief in Shi’a culture—a daily fact of life that is supposed to suffuse one’s awareness of the present moment. It is a son’s separation from a mother, to be sure, but also, in the Sufi interpretation, the individual soul weeping at his isolation from the Divine.

In “Film *Bhajan* Found on a 78 RPM,” the seventh poem in the series, Ali experiments with dispensing with punctuation in order to foreground the experience of the tumble of feelings which accompany grief. “Dark god shine on me you’re all I have left/nothing else blue god you are all I have,”⁴ he opens. This elimination of commas and eschewing of midline caesurae or other cues to a separation of thoughts finds a later flowering in the work of Reetika Vazirani. There also, the sense of the claustrophobia and immediacy of intense emotions is heightened. Interestingly, the blue god to whom Shahid is praying here is not Allah but Krishna: “Dark god you are all you are all I have,” closes the poem. “Swear only swear I am yours I am yours.”

The poet somehow doesn’t need to “explain anything”—everything of import is packed into the poem, its form and shape carrying any additional information not told in it. The poem “Srinagar Airport” bears an epigraph, “There is no god but God,” a rendering of the Arabic line *la-ilaha-il-Allah* (perhaps a more literal rendering would be “No one to worship but Allah.”) In Sapphic stanzas, Ali tells of the arrival in Kashmir, using the final truncated line to imitate the speechlessness of the situation: “Even they are here speechless, weeping,/those of passion//never made a holocaust.”⁵

Often using the truncated fourth line of the Sapphic to break the stanza in a critical place, he plays on the upper- and lower-case gods in the penultimate and final stanzas: “She is/farther than any//god today and nearer than any god. And/God? He’s farther, farther from us, forever/far.” His final lines repeat a similarly truncated version of the epigraph, cut with devastating effect: “We lift the shrine. The women break into/*There is no god but—*”

However, lest one think that for the poet it is a simple matter of defying and denying divinity in anger at loss, the immediately following poem in the sequence is entitled (uppercase) “God,” thus completing the truncated bit of the final Sapphic stanza of the previous poem and moving into a rhythmic and melodious villanelle, though with a dark and dour refrain: “God then is only the final assassin.”⁶

Ali is unable, or unwilling, to leave the line—and thus the sentiment—well enough alone. He continues to riff on this, and on the villanelle’s second refrain, which also contains a traditional Quranic opening, “In the Name of the Merciful” let night begin.’ As he travels through his lament at the actual burial, he comes to two new and visceral versions of the refrain, “God is the only, the only assassin,” and “In no one’s name but hers I let night begin.”

Dur e Aziz Amna offers a close reading of Shahid’s last poem, “The Veiled Suite,” which is in the form of the canzone, an ornate and difficult form. Ali always claimed that no other poet had published more than one, and while he had already published two he insisted on writing a third to clinch his record.

Mihaela Moscaliuc explores Ali’s extensive use of quotation and referentiality in his poems, and Reginald Dwayne Betts contextualizes this same practice in historical and contemporary oral traditions. Mahwash Shoaib explores expressions of desire in Ali’s work while Pakistani American poet Shadab Zeest Hashmi considers Ali’s important work as translator of Faiz Ahmed Faiz.

The Urdu and Arabic forms, including the ghazal, Ali worked in lend themselves to this treatment of the line as a unit of poetry itself, a treatment that has retreated somewhat in new forms of Western poetry that eschew meter as a primary building block of individual lines. In particular, when the typical free verse poem, whether it uses meter or not, is written in short, enjambed lines, one finds a harder time of it actually hearing the music of a line. In all of Ali’s poetry, one really hears the line quoted against space, whether unrhymed free-verse couplets of his earlier books, or the strictly formal schemes of his later work, including monostichic verse and a few one-line poems of which Shahid always took delight in reciting, of his. When he read his own “On Hearing a Lover Not Seen for Twenty Years has Attempted Suicide,” he always deliciously declaimed the poem’s single line: “I suspect it was over me.”⁷ The form of the one-line poem could be as pathos-inducing as humorous

though. He adored (and frequently performed) Merwin's "Epitaph": "o but who would I show it to."

The ghazal, championed by Ali, lends itself to bridging the gap between the line as an individual expulsion of poetic energy, and the line as a part of the mosaic which builds a formal arrangement of an individual poem. In *Call Me Ishmael Tonight*, his magnificent final book, Ali creates poems riffing on lines from many poets he loves, including W.S. Merwin, Daniel Hall, Galway Kinnell, Mark Strand and Michael Palmer. In "For You," he writes to Palmer, "Because in this dialect the eyes are crossed or quartz,/A STATUE A RAZOR A FACT I exclaim for you,"⁸ and later in the signature couplet he uses both Palmer's name and his own: "God's dropped the scales. Whose wings will cover me, Michael?/Don't pronounce the sentence Shahid overcame for you."

Indeed, the passage of energy through a poem or through a body brings up the question of both the restraint and release of that energy, but also of both the poem's end and the body's end, that is to say: its death. Many of the ghazals in his last book were written while Ali was undergoing treatment for cancer, treatment that was ultimately unsuccessful. He confronts his own mortality and his complex feelings towards God in various lines. "Father of Clay, this is Shahid: I am become flesh—/No spirit dusts or will itself redeem about me."⁹

Certainly, above all, the ghazal is a community form, a performed form. Its integrity is in sound and in inventiveness. He truly expanded the sense of poetic community by bringing the form into English, introducing it into countless teaching anthologies, and an anthology he edited himself entitled *Ravishing Disunities*. He was, after all, interested in the beauty of grief, of entropy, of things that did not hold together. The line or couplet in the form of a ghazal has a delirious and rapturous relationship to the architecture of a poem entire—individual couplets can be rearranged, added, deleted, without changing the poem as a whole. In this sense, like the calligraphy, architecture, and geometric patterns of Islamic arts, it is an object loved for its formal properties, loved for its quick switches in tone, from coolness, to humor, to profundity, characterized in its nature—since a refrain repeats throughout the poem—by plumbing multiple meanings, textures, and contexts from a single word or phrase. In his ghazal "Forever," he demonstrates this scintillating shift of moods and tones across the poem. Here are three various couplets:

On the gibbet Hallaj cried *I am the Truth*.
In this universe one dies a plaintive forever.

When parents fall in love with those blond assassins,
their children sign up for Western Civ forever.

The Hangman washes his hands, puts his son to sleep.
But for whom, come dawn, he's decisive forever?

You've forgiven everyone Shahid, even God—
Then how could someone like you not live forever?¹⁰

If the ghazal at first seems a form of dissolution, one only has to see exile—as Mahmoud Darwish did, as Ali did—as a form of homeland to sense its beauty. In the earlier version of his ghazal “Arabic,” Ali wrote, “When Lorca died, they left the balconies open and saw:/his *qasidas* braided, on the horizon, into knots of Arabic.”¹¹ When he revisited the ghazal and rewrote its lines in a later version, he found Lorca’s Arabic forms not to be torqued and tied tightly into knots but rather as an integral component of his existence: “When Lorca died, they left the balconies open and saw/on the sea his *qasidas* stitched seamless in Arabic.”¹²

Ali was hailed as being part of a formalist trend in poetry, but as I mentioned earlier it was an affiliation he did not embrace: “I love forms, but I do not wish to come across as some kind of formalist. I am not, certainly not, the neo-kind who wishes to save Western Civilization—with meters and rhymes!”¹³ In the end, his interest in strict form did not stem from any conservative instinct—rather it was profoundly revolutionary. Writing in these complicated forms—and for this poet, the more complicated, the better—most of which, like the canzone, the ghazal and the Sapphic stanza, were invented in different historical periods, and for languages other than English—was his way of twisting the language into complicated poses—reminiscent of yoga asanas, and like the asanas, these “poses” of language were not performed to create a visual (or linguistic) sense of “beauty,” but rather with the aim of thus accessing the inner, unstable, spirit. In this way, Ali worked in a sufi tradition, attempting, through extreme “form,” rhyme schemes, repetitions, metrical contortions—to reach the state of inspired ecstasy—a moment of pure feeling *without* senses.

So a form, though caught in the binds of restraint is not about the stilling of energy but about the shaping and releasing of energy.

It is, as Mark Doty has argued, a gesture against death. Sense and sound move dangerously against one another within the framework of the line and the couplet in Ali's work.

While I was Ali's student in a seminar on poetic craft at NYU, his illness worsened. In a testament to the deep love poets had for him, his apartment filled with well-wishers and a parade of luminaries appeared in our lecture hall to substitute for him. Grace Schulman remembers the jovial scene in Shahid's Brooklyn living room in her testament, while Ada Limón writes about that last great seminar. We close with two important pieces: an incredible retrospective and elegy by Amitav Ghosh and a comprehensive bibliography of Shahid's publications and interviews by scholar Patricia O'Neill with Reid Larson.

Certainly there were other pieces I would have liked to include here, in particular Bruce King's seminal essay "Agha Shahid Ali's Tricultural Nostalgia," which is cited by many authors here. This essay is easily available through a good library and in apologies for the many essays I could not include I can only hope that this book is just the beginning of a larger, more sustained level of critical attention of Agha Shahid Ali's body of work.

Throughout this process I have been encouraged and supported by various people. Koshin Paley Ellison first dreamed with me the idea of doing a book on Shahid. I thank the authors of these essays for the passionate attention to Ali's work. Saksham Khosla was involved with copyediting at an early stage. And much gratitude goes to Sofie Ghitman, my research assistant, who really helped to pull the book together and took care of many copyediting chores and logistical details; this book wouldn't have happened without her. I also thank the Agha Shahid Ali Literary Trust, in particular Shahid's brother Dr. Iqbal Agha and his sister Dr. Henna Ahmed, for their encouragement and permission to quote from poems and correspondence.

Notes

1. Agha Shahid Ali, *The Veiled Suite* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2009), 194.
2. *Ibid.*, 152.
3. *Ibid.*, 258.
4. *Ibid.*, 266.

5. Ibid., 267.
6. Ibid., 269.
7. Ibid., 295.
8. Ibid., 327
9. Ibid., 354
10. Ibid., 369.
11. Ibid., 225.
12. Ibid., 372.
13. Agha Shahid Ali, "The Ghazal in America: May I?," in *After New Formalism*, ed. Annie Finch (Oregon: Story Line Press, 1999), 129.

SEJAL SHAH

The World Is Full of Paper. Write to Me.

Shahid was the first and only person to call me a Yankee. I first met the poet and professor Agha Shahid Ali in 1996 in the Lower Common Room of Adams House, at Harvard University. It was a winter evening in late March, and I braved the cold to attend his reading, part of the series organized by the renowned Grolier Poetry Book Shop.

In my memory, Shahid wears a Nehru jacket, something pale in color, and he glows, the way the snow glows on certain winter nights. He must have been reading poems from his forthcoming collection, *The Country without a Post Office*, which held the political violence in Kashmir as its backdrop. I can hear him reciting one of my favorite poems from the book—the poem “Farewell”:

The paddle is a heart; it breaks the porcelain waves . . .
My memory keeps getting in the way of your history . . .
If only somehow you could have been mine
what would not have been possible in the world?

Shahid brought the audience to laughter throughout the reading, with his quips and witty asides, before and after reciting his beautiful, haunting poems. When I spoke to him afterward, he was kind and encouraging. I told him I had just applied to the MFA program at UMass Amherst, where he was on the faculty, and that I hoped to study with him. *Come, come*, he said.

Shahid had previously taught at Hamilton College, in Clinton, New York, among other schools in the United States and India. Hamilton is a couple of hours from where I had grown up in Rochester, and Shahid and I knew a Rochester-area South Asian academic in common. He once told me that when he landed in that remote part of central New York State, he called upon everyone—poets and professors—who lived within a couple of hours, to say he had arrived.

Shahid was warm, charismatic, and irreverent. I fell for him the

way you fall for someone across the room at a party and then feel compelled to approach. I had not read his poetry extensively at the time, but as soon as I saw and heard him in Cambridge, I was transfixed. My name was a part of his name; I decided it was destiny.

Knowing almost nothing about Kashmir and the Indian military occupation, I thought of Shahid as simply an Indian American writer. I hoped to find in him a mentor. At the time, I had met only one other South Asian writer: Bengali American Bharati Mukherjee, who declared herself an American writer only, rejecting any hyphen or descriptor such as Indian American or South Asian or Asian American. In the mid-1990s, while a student at Wellesley College, I attended a reading of Mukherjee's at Waterstones bookstore in Back Bay, Boston. Other South Asians were in the audience, and we looked at each other with interest and at her with a kind of hunger. We wanted to see writers who looked like us, who wrote about South Asians in the United States, or who embraced a bicultural or multiethnic identity. I was disappointed to learn Mukherjee did not want to be read in that context. However, I can't blame her—I believe in self-definition. She wished to be understood and accepted as an American writer—as American as anyone else.

The literary landscape was different then. This was before Jhumpa Lahiri won the Pulitzer in 1999; before Salman Rushdie curated the South Asian fiction section of the 1997 special summer issue of the *New Yorker*, which marked India's fiftieth anniversary of independence from British rule and heralded South Asian writers' arrival to American literary audiences by the powers that be; before the UMass Amherst MFA program's own Kamila Shamsie (Shahid's protégé and student at both Hamilton College and UMass) published the first of her several novels; before Kiran Desai won the Man Booker Prize; before I met my second cousin, Suketu Mehta, in Bombay, where he was researching his celebrated book, *Maximum City*.

When I arrived in Amherst in the fall of 1997, I immediately asked Shahid if I could take his poetry workshop. It was more unusual then for poets and fiction writers to take workshops in a genre other than their own (it is a requirement now), but Shahid ignored the genre tribes and welcomed me into his class. *Sure*, he said. *Why not?*

In addition to MFA students, our workshop included a local high school teacher, as well as the poet Kevin Goodan, who commuted to Amherst from New York City once a week; Shahid, ever

inclusive, turned no one away. In class critiques, around a long, rectangular table, Shahid often rewrote our poems, starting from the bottom, working his way to the top. He suggested new possibilities for each of us, reading his revisions in a lilting voice. This rewriting occasionally hurt my feelings, often bewildered me, and sometimes infuriated me. I remember the extensive reordering of my poem “Alexander Street” in Shahid’s distinctive handwriting in fountain-pen ink. In that poem, the first line became, instead, the twenty-eighth. Shahid crossed out so many lines in another poem, “Palette,” that out of the original twenty-five lines of the poem, only eight remained. In “The Simple Dark,” which I had revised once, he re-ordered the stanzas to 2–4–3–6–1–5, taking a concluding verse in the poem, moving it up to the middle, and shuffling the rest.

I was horrified. In college my poems had received every undergraduate literary prize awarded. No one had taken my writing apart, line by line, and so swiftly dismantled their basic architecture, what I thought of as the poem’s intention and integrity. Still, despite my discomfort, I could see that Shahid was doing something interesting. I must have realized I needed to pay attention, because even after twenty years I have held on to all of Shahid’s written comments on my work.

One month into the semester, Shahid delivered a piece of advice to me, announced to our entire workshop: *Never use the word “soul” in a poem!* he declared and then grinned. He was both teasing and completely serious. I winced. I had just brought in a villanelle, “Onyx, Obsidian, Phlox, Coal,” in which “soul” was one of the repeating end words. I have remembered his dictum through the years and have heard myself saying it to my own students: we want our poems and stories to be *soulful*—to possess qualities of the infinite in them—but it is difficult for the word “soul” to do the work of that desire, particularly in undergraduate writing. A word such as “soul” often functions too abstractly—it lacks the concrete detail and specific imagery to make a vital and elusive idea visible and material.

Though regularly miffed by his handling of my poems (*Where was the unadulterated praise?!),* I was, like everyone, still taken by Shahid—admiring both his exquisite poetry and his generous nature.

In our workshop, Shahid would recite each one of our names as though it were a poem, brilliant, somehow miraculous and mysterious, complete and gorgeous in and of itself. *Daniel!*, he’d say, delightedly, *Daaa-niel Haaaaales*. (He loved Daniel Hales’s name, but in

truth it seemed as if he loved all of our names.) *It's the wonderful Kelly Le Fave! James Heflin. Carrie St. George Comer. Andrew Vaaronon. Robert N. Casper!*

Shahid believed in gathering everyone together; he believed in joy—he embodied it. After our workshop sessions, he often suggested we continue the conversation over drinks in town at the Amherst Brewing Company. *This, I thought, is graduate school.* I didn't realize then that this was just Shahid.

Twice that fall he invited our class as well as other students and friends for hours-long, sprawling dinner parties. People spilled over from room to room—Shahid had many friends and admirers, and we all basked in his warmth. When I offered to help cook for one of his parties, Shahid laughed and said, *You American-born Indians are the most terrible cooks.* I couldn't argue. I was taken aback, but had to laugh.

One evening, when the stove burners were not working and the food had to be warmed up elsewhere, Shahid charmed us for hours as only an exceptionally good host could, playing Hindi film music and ABBA. (Why not? The perfect Shahidian combination!) No one minded not eating for a while—we may well not have even noticed. I remember he broke into song. *Hey*, I said, *I know that song*, and began dancing in his Northampton home, performing the Bharata Natyam Indian classical dance steps I had learned as a child. Shahid clapped his hands in encouragement. *Vah, vah!* he said. Finally—the subcontinental applause I had sought!

His expansive nature was a striking contrast to the awkward self-consciousness true of so many writers. In *Best American Poetry 1997*, above his poem “Return to Harmony 3,” he wrote,

To my subcontinental darling across the continents—love—of course. . . .

In my copy of *The Country without a Post Office*, he filled the entire front page with his effusive script in blue fountain-pen ink (now slightly faded):

*For SEJAL—
—Shah of Shahs!—
So royal, so princely—
So regal—so she
Who couldn't go to Spain
Is going to Italy!
Ah!*

He decorated this note with long dashes flourishing on either side of the “Ah!,” spanning the width of the page.

Later, he continued in another pen:

And now, where is lipstick?

Purple? Of colour?

Sejal has the magic!

Who else could have written about the purple lipstick I wore that year at his book signing, when all of us had crammed into Wootton’s, a narrow bookstore in downtown Amherst, for the *Best American Poetry* reading—in a way that transformed my name, travel plans, and shade of lipstick into near poetry? It was what we all wanted—what anyone wants from someone he or she admires—and certainly what I wanted—for him to see the magic that is only you.

I cannot imagine my time in the MFA program without Shahid—without those warming dinner parties in wintry Massachusetts, without remembering our poems unwritten, in order for different possibilities to be imagined.

As a professor and teacher myself for over a decade now, I understand his rewriting, painful as it was for me, as another form of attention, even as another kind of love. It is a strategy I use too—unwriting, rewriting, undoing—in the workshops I now teach. I think of Shahid when I attempt to respond to students’ poems honestly, generously, usefully. It’s much easier to shy away from the declaration that a poem is not quite working and to instead merely praise what is easily praiseworthy, but what has stayed with me all these years is the more honest, if ego-bruising, critique. I can see now that Shahid was trying to lessen my dependence on strict narrative, my desire to tell a story within a poem, and to instead allow the poem to unfold, to breathe, to surprise, to live, through the generation of lyric possibilities.

During my first year of graduate school, Shahid was the director of the MFA program, and I had reason to call him once or twice at home. His answering machine message was simply, *I knew you’d call*. No preamble. The first time I heard it, I hung up. Shahid had, as usual, caught me off guard. His outgoing message sounded like a line from one of his poems, like a moment of delight, of enchantment. His voice left me speechless and smiling.

Shahid’s message was to the point and too short—like his life. No time to think of what to say, to contrive to fill the space with

unnecessary words. We flocked to him: students, poets, and writers; ambitious dreamers. I see him in his Northampton kitchen, turning toward me in a royal blue sweater, his shirt sleeves unbuttoned and pushed back: he is cooking for us. I've snapped a photo and caught him off guard in the picture—but he's still posing, still gesturing—still lovely, still young. He would probably hate me saying so, but I think his eyes look soulful. *I knew you'd call.*

Sejal Shah
November 1997

Alexander Street

- 28 ~~On Alexander Street~~, Creme de la Creme is the Blue Nile.
27 The Hong Kong braces itself against December, ~~her tight fist of emotion~~
26 Anytime I return is a vest with a thousand mirrors.
- 23 What about the universal aunt? Does she begin to knit?
24 Through the walls we built, I hear the faucet drip,
25 "Make haste!" "Make haste!"
- 21 I hated everyone.
22 I wanted something that began like a song.
~~The scarred stillness of a figure at the desk~~
Each car is a stage of arrivals. A milk-gold stag,
a buffet of ~~rain~~ drown the red spice of tongue.
- 20 Worcester, Dorchester, Rochester.
19 Take care. One of these will trip you up.
18 My favorite whore walks behind me.
17 She is also my height. ~~She is a true character I cannot trust,~~
though she laughs with lovely hooks and eyes.
- 10 Tonight the kids will sleep.
11 Their dreams are close-captioned, and ~~commence~~ free
12 I haven't painted since I got the news.
- 7 Take this into account: I fell in
for the smoothness of you. Eyebrows
are a story that branch into miles.
Do you smell the wax of evenings?
Mother's sister has left your brother.
You never believed in the anger of children.
What did you believe in, Father?
- 13 Enough. Eat and retire to bed.
14 My whole town awaits your call.
15 No one likes to hear about strawberries.
- 18 After three afternoon naps, scabs appear on my knuckles.
16 They are sentinels, rough stars. Your breasts shimmer
17 like noontime asphalt. Did you hear the sign?
- 3 An orange moon is rising.
2 "Begin again," she whispers into the sidewalk ~~car.~~
1 These are stories of the untitled aunts.

Make out?
Some girl?
non-sequitur

Palette

1 Hello Salmon, *hello.*

~~C~~ ~~Hunched over steam, I constellate.~~
~~Breathe until breath slips.~~
~~Your music blooms through poisonous sleep.~~

~~Unburden. Hand over hand toward the green mark~~
~~sealing twin plaits of braided rope.~~ 3
2 You might have asked me where to sleep.

3 I talk to a woman I have met before.
~~There is perpetual wound in her eyes.~~
~~Erase me from the childhood wall.~~

4 My job was simple: water the moon. ✓
~~I~~ ~~craved purple beyond the fence. (Debbie's flowers were always~~
~~more beautiful. What I remember is much.)~~ 3

5 What is the view from her window?
~~Breathe until breath slips.~~
~~Every bud is the promise of a promise.~~

6 It is where I belonged then, near the water.
~~Stalk teased from water, this crazy bush of color.~~
~~Not primal, but prime. The sharp maroon at the reservoir's edge.~~

7 I want the three rising bones.
~~It~~ ~~molt into rudeness.~~
~~Color begets color, carimates each flaw.~~

~~On the plant loaded still, color assumes form.~~
~~Gather grayness from five still swings.~~

8 Peter, I wrote you today. ✓

Shahid, I tried
cutting + pasting
(literally) ...

The Simple Dark

- 2 | It tastes like Christmas: cinnamon, nutmeg, cloves,
eucalyptus! Hang the moon, fearless spider.
I spin the dial through static to song to song. (Tucson)
- 4 | The night is a coffee can, a stem of agapanthus.
She streaks age across our faces.
She presses white into pavement.
- 3 | Turn there, and there, unfolds like an atlas. — cayennes
Light curves its edges, catches her hem
on the broad lip of Radio Hill.
- 6 | You follow my back-seat directions: Take South.
The eighteenth sky sweats slick-sided pints.
Drop me home, drop me home, golden one—
- 1 | Night spills between us, as though the simple dark.
You delight in ignoring her it seems no street
could fashion us here, although any street should.
- 5 | Breath silvering from your lips jangles keys
against their rings. By January, it runs dry.
Still, no other drink tasted so good.

RITA BANERJEE

Between Postindependence and the Cold War

*Agha Shahid Ali's Publications
with the Calcutta Writers Workshop*

In 1958, editor, critic, translator, and poet P. Lal established the English-language creative writing group the Writers Workshop in Kolkata. The Writers Workshop helped launch the careers of many well-known English-language South Asian authors, such as Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee, Vikram Seth, A. K. Ramanujan, Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, and Agha Shahid Ali. As an editor, P. Lal was a key figure in establishing the relevance and necessity of Anglophone South Asian writing in the postindependence period. His seminal work, *Modern Indian Poetry in English: The Writers Workshop Selection, an Anthology & a Credo* (1969) served as a manifesto for the function and viability of Indian English literature in the postindependence period and featured one of Agha Shahid Ali's most dystopian and memorable poems, "Lunarscape." In the poem Ali not only critiqued the rivalry between the United States and the USSR during the Cold War but also presented the recent American moon landing as a neocolonial and self-destructive move. After the publication of "Lunarscape," Agha Shahid Ali went on to publish his first and second collections of poems, *Bone-Sculpture* (1972) and *In Memory of Begum Akhtar* (1979)¹ with P. Lal's Writers Workshop.² Ali's first collection, *Bone-Sculpture*, featured several poems that reflected his response to the postindependence and postpartition realities of South Asia, his own conflicted feelings over his divided home state of Kashmir, and poems that responded to the Cold War, cultural revolutions, and other global political events of the time, and captured Ali's own experiences of immigration.

Responding to the Cold War: Ali's "Lunarscape" (1969)

"Lunarscape," which was Ali's earliest publication with the Writers Workshop group and one of his earliest poems published in English, touched upon Cold War themes, such as the chilling consequences of the space race and the inhumane aspects of technological and political progress. Ali's poem implies that not all journeys, imagined or otherwise, were socially, politically, or even theoretically beneficial. "Lunarscape" also paints a dystopian vision of the future. In the poem, he writes:

Circle these naked rocks, stranger,
you can't go home again

To these moon-wounds carved in thirsty stones,
add color with your bleeding feet

Tomorrow, on this hostile horizon,
your silver earth will rise³

Like the Hindi modernist poet Gajanan Madhav Muktibodh (1917–64), who famously wrote about the late colonial South Asian writer as an explorer of worlds or as a new voyager in his well-known poem "Dūr Tārā" (*Tār Sāptak*, 1943), Ali also examines the possibilities of journey and destination in outer space. However, this English poem, which was published in the same year as the successful Apollo 11 moon landing, is critical of the desire to journey to and claim foreign territories. Once the astronaut arrives to claim the moon, Ali argues, he realizes that "he can't go home again." The moon itself, a territory to be possessed, traps and bleeds its possessor, and the lost voyager looks back from the "hostile horizon" he now inhabits to the vision of his lost earth, which beckons to him like another silver moon. Allegorically, Ali's poem can be read as a critique of the colonial or neo-colonial endeavor. Once the empires of Europe have been largely deconstructed after World War II, Ali fears that nations like the US and USSR might reenact colonial exercises by attempting to indoctrinate nations across the globe with their respective cultural values. Ali, rather than being impressed by the American landing on the moon, sees the event as sinister, as the American media and

government use the moon landing to highlight the merits of their country, a Cold War tactic against the USSR.

Meditations on Death and Loss in *Bone-Sculpture* (1972)

Another text which explores the lacuna between history and personal responsibility is Ali's first collection of poems, *Bone-Sculpture*. The collection, which consists of thirty-two pages, begins with the poem "Bones."⁴ The poem sets the mood of the collection with the speaker's meditation on, or as some readers might argue, preoccupation with, death. The first stanza of "Bones" begins with the line "The years are dead" and ends with the lines "mixing blood with / mud, memory with memory. I'm / still alone" (lines 1, 3-5). The opening of the poem suggests that histories of loss and violence have already been charted or narrated and that the speaker feels a rupture from his personal and familial histories in which the bloodshed and trauma of partition have been inscribed. The second stanza further explores the speaker's meditation on violence and death and examines the distance the speaker feels from his ancestors who experienced firsthand the brutality of the Indian partition and the rising crisis in Kashmir.⁵ Ali goes on to write,

Death filled the years, there
was no time to mourn. No time to remember
slaughtered martyrs or ancestors
who knew the history of miracles. Grandfather

still mocks me in my dream: did
I light the oil-lamp at this tomb?

In this mosaic-world of silent
graveyards the difference lies between
death and dying. It's

futile to light oil-lamps here
and search for grandfather or
forgotten ancestors. (lines 6-17)

In this poem, while the speaker is attempting to mourn his grandfather and ancestors and remember the traumas incurred during

warfare and partition, a deep fissure is created between the desire to remember history and the inability of the Kashmiri individual, who has grown up decades removed from the traumas of partition in postindependence India, to understand or even begin to take responsibility for the horrors of the past. As Bruce King notes, "Many of Ali's poems are autobiographical and concern his exploration of origins, his condition of exile, or his evolution and life as a poet" (5). Given Ali's childhood and upbringing largely away from his ancestral home of Kashmir and his subsequent permanent move to the United States,⁶ it comes as no surprise that the speaker of "Bones," as a reflection of Ali, feels both an intense longing to be part of the historical narrative of Kashmir and the inevitable sense of disappointment and self-loathing at being physically and historically isolated from the partition and subsequent wars of Kashmir.⁷ Thus in "Bones" the unremembered martyrs and ancestors become almost as unknowable as do the silence, distance, and death that fill the years between the traumas inflicted on lost relatives and friends and Ali's later attempts to memorialize them. In the poem, Ali's grandfather seems to mock him as he struggles to comprehend and then take responsibility for a past that is part of his cultural legacy but that he did not experience directly himself.

In the last lines of the poem, Ali ponders, "Their / flesh must have turned soft as dust / and how can one complain to bones?" (lines 17–19). In these lines the narratives, personal identities, and material bodies of Ali's Kashmiri family seem to turn and fade into dust, a process that anonymizes and erases their individuality and particular traumas. Here Ali appears to argue that while a figure of a lost ancestor can be invoked through meditation on the past within a poem, this figure cannot be fully revived or even remembered.

In addition to spending much of his life outside of his ancestral Kashmir, Ali may have felt a further fissure develop between the common narratives and values of his grandparents' generation and his own. Ali's parents "were modern and secular, read Freud and Marx, but his grandparents were observant [Muslims]" (King 6). Having been raised in a secular household by his parents in Delhi, Kashmir, and in the United States, Ali may have felt a further sense of alienation from the everyday rituals, stories, and practices of his grandfather's generation. His very sense of not knowing which cultural, historical, or religious ideals his grandfather valued seems to haunt and mock the speaker of "Bones." In the final lines of "Bones," Ali attempts to assuage his angst, and what one might call feelings

of survivor guilt, by acknowledging that his efforts to take responsibility for his ancestral and historical past reflect more of his own preoccupation with self-dislocation than his desire to revive the narratives of those long deceased.

Ali's preoccupation with death as a stand-in for loss and historical and cultural rupture are found throughout *Bone-Sculpture*, in poems such as "after seeing the film 'Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?,'" "Lunarscape," "Cremation," "Autumn in Srinagar," "Another Death," "You (Fragment-V)," "Fragment-IX," and "notes for the unabandoned stranger." These poems, King argues, contain "expressions of cultural [and historical] dislocation" and "anticipate the surreal, somewhat grotesque lyricism found in later verse" (6). In the poem "after seeing the film 'Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?'" Ali transposes his own feelings of cultural, historical, and linguistic dislocation onto Edward Albee's character of the unhappy middle-aged wife Martha. Ali assumes Martha's perspective and writes, "i'm chilled in / a sweating illusion . . . i'm alone and cold / in the raw / futility of tears . . . i smile / in the mirror / these smiles / must be mine" (lines 3–4, 15–18). The poem explores the space that the human psyche can inhabit, somewhere between acknowledging truths and giving in to the possibility and comforts of illusion. The smile in the mirror seems to reflect back an idealized identity the speaker wishes she could have. In Ali's poem, as in Albee's narrative, a violent splitting of identities and realities occurs. The poem ends with the haunting lines "my child / is dead / dead?" (lines 23–25). The final lines echo Martha's feelings of guilt, uncertainty, and realization from Albee's text. But they also suggest that the child who is now dead after the games between Martha, George, and their guests have been played out not only represents the death of possibility but also the death of the imagination. This sense of definite rupture at the end of the poem reflects Ali's own feelings of sociohistorical, cultural, and religious dislocation. Later in life while living in New York, Ali would confess to his close friend and fellow writer Amitav Ghosh, "I wish all this had not happened. . . . This dividing of the country, the divisions between people—Hindu, Muslim, Muslim, Hindu—you can't imagine how much I hate it. It makes me sick" (Ghosh 6).

As Ali's confession to Ghosh demonstrates, acknowledging and coming to terms with the legacies of split identities and lost histories appears as a key theme in *Bone-Sculpture*. The "mute corpse" Ali invokes in "Autumn in Srinagar" reflects his feelings of guilt about

his inability to revive the histories, names, cultural markers, values, and narratives of the past but also begins to hint at the dangers of the speaker's self-willed obsession with the past and the deceased. In the fourth section of "Autumn in Srinagar,"⁸ entitled "a late prayer," Ali mulls over what this meditation on death leads to and writes, "chips of bone-love / make love to the corpse / and / the tombs / shiver" (lines 29–33).

As the poem progresses, Ali seems to realize that his desire to re-create Kashmir's cultural history and division and narrate his grandparents' experiences of partition reveal his own personal quest for identity, selfhood, and self-acceptance rather than simply attempting to reconstruct the past. Thus, in this final meditation on death, Ali confronts all of his imagined and unknown figures, all the corpses he speculates on and attempts to remember, and admits that this obsession with death parallels almost a conjugal interest or a fetishized nostalgia for a past that he re-creates in his own image.

In the final poems of the collection Ali confronts his inability to speak about the past without speaking of his own personal conflicts of identity first. In the poem "You (Fragment-V)" Ali notes the histories of violence and division he inhabits and that he cannot seem to fully express in his own poetry. In the last lines of the poem he writes, "please mutilate my / wounded poetry hands // I will not write again" (lines 10–12). This idea of being a writer who is caught between cultures, histories, and anxieties about his own dislocation reoccurs in "Fragment-IX," where Ali writes,

Destiny is another matter: I
whore myself to the escapes of the times.

The times hide my permanent wounds:
my feet depict sorrow, they
twist like a beggar's. Your smile
eats into my flesh, it breaks my bones.
I do not have cures nor do I protest. (lines 7–13)

In these stanzas, Ali conveys that the history and guilt associated with witness and survival cannot be erased. Although Ali himself was not a direct victim of partition or the subsequent Indo-Pakistan Wars, he found himself constantly shuttling between Delhi, Kashmir, and the United States and thus was unable to permanently return to his homeland or to know the histories of his family members and ancestors who experienced and died in these conflicts. In

turn, this sense of loss and distance helps to create a permanent crisis of identity and wound within Ali. Amitav Ghosh notes, “I do not think it was an accident that [Ali’s] mind turned to Kashmir in speaking of death. Already in his poetic imagery, death, Kashmir, and shaahid/shahiid [witness and martyr] had become so closely overlaid as to be inseparable” (15).

While Ali is successful in assuming the role of witness and martyr in *Bone-Sculpture* (1972) and in layering his discussions of his Kashmiri and familial past with images of death and fragments of bones and speech, for the critic of his work Ali’s anxieties can be perceived as being existential, nostalgic, or even exaggerated. It is this dismissal of the trauma, which Ali experiences as a survivor, immigrant, and postindependence South Asian writer, torn between cultural affinities, that he addresses in “Fragment-IX.” The dismissal of Ali’s personal quest for identity and his meditation on historical loss symbolically eat into his flesh and break his bones in the poem. In “notes for the unabandoned stranger” he openly confesses how he has “lost [his] identity” in the dislocation of homelands, languages, and familial and cultural histories (line 4). And thus, for all the criticisms of nostalgia or performance leveled at him, Ali continues to bear the silence of want and witness, or as he summarizes, “I do not have any cures nor do I protest” (“Fragment-IX,” line 13).

The Challenges of Writing in English as a Postindependence South Asian Writer

Another critical trope which inhabits Ali’s *Bone-Sculpture* is the poet’s concern with writing in English, the language of his education, rather than Kashmiri, the language of his ancestors, or Urdu, the language of Delhi, where Ali was raised. Speaking of the poem “The Editor Revisited,”⁹ Bruce King notes the difficulty Agha Shahid Ali faced in establishing himself as a viable English-language South Asian poet in the postindependence era. King writes,

Marxists tell him he must learn to write in Hindi, Urdu, or Bengali if he is to be an Indian poet. A product of three cultures (Western, Hindu, and Muslim) and a “foreign” language, he realizes that he is only paying lip service to Revolution. Instead he continues to study English literature and ironically observes that “Shakespeare feeds my alienation.” Although Ali’s politics are of

the Left, he like many writers, is aware of the absurd incongruities between actuality and political simplifications. (6)

Although Ali found himself triangulated between Delhi, Kashmir, and the United States, and between the linguistic cultures of Urdu, Kashmiri, and English, ultimately, he chose to compose his poetry, inflected with narratives of his Kashmiri heritage and later with Urdu and Arabic poetic forms and meters, in English. In “Dear Editor,” from *Bone-Sculpture*, Ali traces the anxieties and possibilities of writing poetry in English in the postindependence period. He begins the poem with the stanzas

call me a poet
dear editor
they call this my alien language

I am a dealer in words
that mix cultures
and leave me rootless:
this is an excellent trade (lines 1–7)

As Ali navigates the postindependence Anglophone literary world in “The Editor,” he acknowledges that English for him functions both as a language of expression and as a language of treason. Although he is acknowledged as a “poet” by his critics, his readers, adversaries, and rivals imply that to write in English is to write in an “alien language.” The very notion that English is an alien literary language suggests the postindependence South Asian writer must feel guilt and acknowledge the danger of writing in one’s former colonial tongue. However, throughout the poem Ali acknowledges the agency and transgressive power afforded to writers who dare to continue writing in English despite critical and political pressure. He first takes ownership of English as “my alien language” in the poem and explains both the agency and limitations granted to him as a writer of English and “a dealer of words / that mix cultures” (lines 3–5).

In the poem Ali acknowledges that by writing in English, he is able to give voice to his most intimate forms of expressions: “liquid words wet / with my own sweat” (lines 9–10). Although the desire to write in English seems natural and intimate to the speaker of Ali’s poem, he also acknowledges that writing in English and speaking about South Asian themes and specificities can be “an excellent

trade” and that the “liquid-words” he produces with his own sweat are commodified and sold in “perfume-bottles” (line 11). In doing so, Ali acknowledges how his critics can construe his penchant for writing in English as a market-driven move to reach a wider global audience of readers or as a means of exporting or exoticizing South Asian culture, narratives, and themes for outside readers.

In this way, Ali’s embrace of his persona as a “dealer of words” or as a “hustler” of the English language demonstrates both the possibilities of uniting disparate audiences and the dangers of creating cultural commodities for export through the use of English as a postindependence literary language. Thus Ali provides a more complicated view of the intended goals of postindependence South Asian Anglophone literature than vocal advocates of English such as P. Lal would be willing to admit.

However, as “Dear Editor” progresses, Ali also acknowledges the agency he imbues in writing from a point of dislocation between cultures and languages. In the second section of the poem he writes, “I swear / dear editor / I have hopes / hopes which assume shapes in / alien territories // they come closest / in dream landscapes” (lines 16–22). The possibility of verbalizing new identities and giving voices to individuals who find themselves triangulated between cultures is implied by these lines. As Amitav Ghosh notes, Ali’s “door was a voyage between continents,” and English-language poetry also serves as a voyage or voyager between continents, colonial and postcolonial political realities, and tales of cultural loss and reinvention (4). As an English-language poet, Ali is able to verbalize what it means to be a second-generation Kashmiri and secular Muslim living in Delhi and in the United States to both a domestic South Asian audience and a larger Anglophone audience far removed from the traumas and consequences of partition in South Asia. In this way he is able to demonstrate how the postindependence South Asian author functions as an individual, as a navigator between cultures and histories, and as an illustrator of “alien territories” and narratives.

In his first collection of poetry, *Bone-Sculpture*, and in his poem “Lunarscape,” Ali’s attempts to come to terms with his Kashmiri heritage, the legacy of partition, and his own triangulation between the languages of Kashmiri, Urdu, and English and between the cultures of Kashmir, Delhi, and the United States are keenly felt and reflected. Having lived in Indiana as a teenager during the early 1960s, Ali’s ambivalence toward the American space program as a symbol of dominance and violence in the Cold War era is subtly

expressed in his poem “Lunarscape.” The collection *Bone-Sculpture* takes Ali’s feelings of triangulation and dislocation between cultures and histories one step further as Ali finds himself meditating on the unknowable histories and experiences of his grandparents and family members during the fight for independence and subsequent partition and wars between India and Pakistan. In the collection Ali examines the images of death and loss that mark the religiously and politically divided present-day Kashmir and the dangers of fetishizing the past in an attempt to revive it. Moreover, in *Bone-Sculpture* Ali directly confronts the criticism aimed at many postindependence South Asian writers, P. Lal and the members of his Writers Workshop included, and examines the limitations and possibilities of composing poetry in English. Ali notes that English can be read both as a language of postcolonial expression and as a language of postindependence treason. However, as a writer educated in Kashmir, Delhi, and in the United States, Ali argues that through English he can reflect most accurately the cultural and historical lacunas he inhabits and can most accurately give expression to the narratives of dislocation and trauma that are particular to him. By writing in English, Ali is able to discuss his Kashmiri heritage and personal traumas freely to both a domestic South Asian audience and one abroad. Moreover, as Ali continued to write in English, he was able to transform and subvert the language to reflect his own cultural and historical territories. Writer and critic Amitav Ghosh comments, “The formalization of the ghazal may well prove to be Shahid’s most important scholarly contribution to the canon of English poetry” (8). And of this later experimental endeavor, Ali states, “If one writes in free verse—and one should—to subvert Western civilization, surely one should write in forms to save oneself from Western civilization?” (Ghosh 8). Ali’s ability to incorporate and canonize the ghazal form into English literature has redefined the cultural markers and values of contemporary English-language poetry. And Ali’s own unique vision of the postindependence era has helped him to radically alter the values of a colonial language by speaking from the perspective of the in-between.

Notes

1. Begum Akhtar (1914–74) was a classically trained singer of Hindi and Urdu ghazals, ragas, thumris, and dadras. She was revered as a concert singer and for her recordings of classical Indic music as well as for her fea-

ture performances in Hindi, Urdu, and Bengali films. Her first film performance as a musician was in the film *King for a Day* (*Ek Din Kā Bādaśāh*, 1933), produced by the East India Film Company of Calcutta, and she was also featured in other memorable roles such as Durga Bhai, the singer, in Satyajit Ray's art house film *The Music Room* (*Jalsāghar*, 1958). For Agha Shahid Ali, Begum Akhtar was a great inspiration for his own lyrical expression. "He had met the great ghazal singer when he was in his teens, through a friend, and she had become an abiding presence and influence in his life. In his apartment there were several shrine-like niches that were filled with pictures of the people he worshipped: Begum Akhtar was one of these, along with his father, his mother, and James Merrill" (Ghosh 6).

2. Agha Shahid Ali's volume of collected poems, *The Veiled Suite* (2009), did not include any selections from either of his first two poetry collections, *Bone-Sculpture* or *In Memory of Begum Akhtar*. These collections were omitted from *The Veiled Suite* not because of any difficulty in obtaining copyright permission from the Writers Workshop but rather, as Hena Ahmad, Agha Shahid Ali's sister, notes, "These [two] volumes were not included in the collected works primarily because they detracted from the collected. No other reason. As you will recognize in your careful reading of the poems, a few reappear in a more mature form in later publications." In this way, later editors may have considered these two volumes of Ali's early work to represent his juvenilia.

3. Ali, "Lunarscape."

4. A handful of Ali's poems had been published prior to the debut of *Bone-Sculpture*. The poems "Bones" and "Pilgrimage to Amarnath" were published in *Quest*, and "'a last image' (*Autumn in Srinagar*)" was published in *Thought* (Delhi). Also, as discussed, Ali's poem "Lunarscape" (1969) was published in P. Lal's *Modern Indian Poetry in English: The Writers Workshop Selection, an Anthology & a Credo*.

5. Bruce King argues that, finding himself at a loss between Indian, Kashmiri, and American cultures, histories, and languages, Ali inhabits a trilingual, tricultural space. King writes, "[This] trilingual, tricultural, [Ali] is a product of many events—Indian independence and the sub-continent's partition, the migrations of peoples—and influences—education in literary modernisms, participation in contemporary literary styles—which make him 'post-colonial'" (2).

6. King highlights how Ali spent much of his childhood and youth, even before his permanent migration to the United States, away from his homeland of Kashmir in Delhi and in the United States. He writes, "Born in Delhi into a highly educated English, Urdu, and Kashmiri speaking family, Ali lived in Kashmir before attending the Burriss School in Muncie, Indiana. The Burriss School is affiliated to Ball State University—where Ali's father was earning the first Doctorate ever granted by Ball State University as well as the first Doctorate in Education by a Kashmiri" (2). Ali moved with his father and family to Indiana 1961 at the age of twelve and remained there for three years before returning to India (Ghosh 11). Later Ali would return to Kashmir as a young man to receive his bachelor's in humanities from the University of Kashmir in 1968, before returning to

Delhi for a master's degree in English literature in 1970. Ali lived in Delhi and taught at the University of Delhi until 1975, when he moved to the United States and obtained a second master's degree in English at Penn State University, where he went on to "write a doctoral thesis, which was later published as *T.S. Eliot as Editor* (1986)" (King 3).

7. Ali, born in 1949, never witnessed the Indo-Pakistan War of 1947 over Kashmir but may have witnessed part of the Indo-Pakistan War of 1965 in Kashmir. By 1970 he was again living in Delhi and did not directly witness the effects of the Indo-Pakistan War of 1970 within Kashmir.

8. Ali lived in Srinagar, Kashmir, with his family as a child and also while attending the University of Kashmir for his bachelor's degree in the late 1960s. Amitav Ghosh writes of Ali's experiences and memories of Srinagar: "In the broadest sense, his vision tended always towards the inclusive and ecumenical. . . . He spoke often of a time in his childhood when he had been seized by the desire to create a small Hindu temple in his room in Srinagar. He was initially hesitant to tell his parents but when he did they responded with an enthusiasm equal to his own. His mother bought him *mūrtīs* [mini idols] and other accouterments and for a while, he was assiduous in conducting *pujas* at this shrine. This was a favorite story. 'Whenever people talk to me about Muslim fanaticism,' he said to me once, 'I tell them how my mother helped me make a temple in my room. "What do you think about that?" I ask them'" (13–14).

9. "The Editor Revisited" was published in *In Memory of Begum Akhtar* (Calcutta: Writers Workshop, 1979).

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AMANDA GOLDEN

“This is an archive”

Agha Shahid Ali's Postcards from Kashmir

In the twenty-first century, printed postcards are fading from view. Social media now provides more accessible means of sharing messages, often with images of oneself and one's surroundings. I began the first session of my lyric poetry course by teaching Agha Shahid Ali's "Postcard from Kashmir" alongside digital images of postcards from Kashmir that he sent to the poet Anthony Hecht, which are housed with Hecht's correspondence in the Stuart A. Rose Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library at Emory University (figs. 1–4).¹ Considering these artifacts in relation to Ali's poem allowed us to examine the genre of the postcard, Ali's engagement with it, and the role of archives in shaping literary history. The postcards that Ali sent also enable further treatment of his responses to the idea of an archive in his poetry.

Ali began "Postcard from Kashmir" as part of his thesis at Penn State in 1979, publishing it as the opening poem of *The Half-Inch Himalayas* in 1987.² A decade later, he returned to the subject of correspondence in *The Country without a Post Office*. In 1994 Ali introduced himself to Hecht in a handwritten letter that asked for his advice on Ali's canzone several months after Hecht gave a reading of his poetry at Amherst College.³ At the time, Ali was teaching at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and wrote to Hecht from nearby Northampton, where Hecht had taught as a lecturer of English at Smith College from 1956 to 1962.⁴ In October 1998 Ali wrote to Hecht again, inviting his response to a new "canzone."⁵ Hecht responded four days later, praising and offering feedback on Ali's poems.⁶ As Ali responded a month later, after hearing of Hecht's confidence in Ali as a poet from a mutual friend, "Such high praise from a master like you leaves me speechless."⁷

The first postcard displays a man gathering purple saffron flowers in a field, with "KASHMIR" in calligraphy along the left edge of the card. Ali dated his note to Hecht in Northampton "December of 1998" but mailed it in the new year (figs. 1–2). The image on the

second card recalls the “ultramarine” Jhelum River of “Postcard from Kashmir” and the card’s “half-inch Himalayas” inevitably pale in comparison with the memory that the poem evokes.⁸ Ali dated the card June 14, 1999, but did not mail it until September, from Salt Lake City, Utah (figs. 3–4). He explained in his message to Hecht that he was “writing from Kashmir. My home is a five-minute walk from the banks of the Jhelum.” Beneath Hecht’s address, Ali added on September 1 that he did not have Hecht’s address when he was in Kashmir. If Ali composed the second postcard in Kashmir, when did he acquire the first one? Because postcards are a form of everyday correspondence that can be significant and insignificant, they can present invaluable records and remnants of daily life.

The mode of address in both postcards also reflects the development of Ali and Hecht’s friendship. The first postcard opens, “Dear Mr. Hecht,” and closes, “My warmest regards, Agha Shahid Ali” (fig. 2). Composing his post, Ali also turned the card vertically to maximize the amount of writing space, and he continued this strategy in the second card, filling both spaces with green and then black ink (figs. 2, 4). On January 1, 1999, Hecht began a letter to “My dear Mr. Ali” inquiring about the representation of Muslim beliefs in *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*.⁹ Ali addressed his response to “My dear Hecht Sahib,” beginning, “If I may resort to a South Asian Muslim courtly manner.”¹⁰ Hecht responded on January 21 to “My dear Shahid.”¹¹ The second postcard that Ali sent, the following June, began, “My dear Tony (I’m taking the first-name liberty because your last letter to me was thus signed” and, running out of space at the bottom edge of the card, he signed it, “Yours—Shahid” (fig. 4).¹² Noting that he was writing from Kashmir, Ali also introduced Hecht to his home, gesturing toward the card’s photograph of the Jhelum.

Sharing these materials with my students, I was able to discuss with them the singularity of artifacts and the significance of the shape that they take.¹³ “Postcard from Kashmir” begins with a couplet specifying the space of the mailbox and the precise, standard, familiar size of the postcard: “Kashmir shrinks into my mailbox, / my home a neat four by six inches” (*Veiled Suite*, 29). He follows the image of “neatness” in the near rhymes, ending each line in the second couplet with a “d” sound: “I always loved neatness. Now I hold / the half-inch Himalayas in my hand.” The following stanza envisions the image on the card, while capturing the frustrating inability of any image to represent the reality of place, memory, and

color: "This is home. And this is the closest / I'll ever be to home. When I return, / The colors won't be so brilliant, / the Jhelum's waters so clean, / so ultramarine. My love / so over exposed." The poem tells the story of the aftermath of receiving the postcard: "And my memory will be a little / out of focus, in it / a giant negative, black / and white, still undeveloped."

Both of the postcards from Kashmir that Ali sent Hecht engage expectations of the genre. Like the card that the protagonist imagines in "Postcard from Kashmir," the postcards that Ali sent to Hecht are approximately four by six inches. Both cards were also probably marketed to an English-speaking audience. The first postcard includes a caption on the back noting that photograph depicts "Saffron Fields near Pampor." Beside the photograph, the second postcard notes, "Garden of the Himalaya" (without an "s") and on the verso adds that the photograph is "by Olivier Follmi," a "famous photographer of the Himalayas."

While the speaker of "Postcard from Kashmir" imagines that reality will not compare to the vibrancy of the postcard, the second postcard that Ali sent to Hecht has not aged well; as you can see in the upper right-hand corner of figure 3, the plastic is peeling away from the surface of the cardboard. The recollection is, in Walter Benjamin's terms, the work of art, and the postcard a reproduction. The place and one's impression of it will change. As Benjamin proposes in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," "The situations into which the product of mechanical reproduction can be brought may not touch the actual work of art, yet the quality of its presence is always depreciated. This holds not only for the art work but also, for instance, for a landscape which passes in review before the spectator in a movie." The "aura" is the element that changes in reality: "One might subsume the eliminated element in the term 'aura' and go on to say: that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art. . . . And in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, it reactivates the object reproduced."¹⁴ But the postcard is the element that "meets" Ali's protagonist and the researcher or student considering the physical cards that Ali sent to Hecht. They too are singular artifacts and subject to decay, not maintaining their original condition yet also preserving the exchange.

While Ali's poem focuses on the photograph and the place that it depicts, its title personifies Kashmir, suggesting both the back and

front of the card provide a message. In the case of Ali's postcards to Hecht, the message on the first card does not overtly respond to the image on the postcard. Instead, the postcard functions as a piece of stationery, particularly as Ali probably composed it in the United States. By contrast, as we have seen, Ali introduces Hecht to the location that the second card depicts, near where he was writing at the time. In *The Post Card* (1980), Jacques Derrida observes, "What I prefer, about post cards, is that one does not know what is in front or what is in back, here or there, near or far, the Plato or the Socrates, recto or verso. Nor what is the most important, the picture or the text, and in the text, the message or the caption, or the address."¹⁵ When encountering Ali's postcards in Hecht's archive, at first it may seem that messages to Hecht take precedence, but they are physically connected to the postcards' photographs, which would have also shaped Hecht's visual landscape.

In a poem about a postcard, the poem's lines potentially evoke both a card's message and its image, complicating what one might assume to be a form of *ekphrasis*. One of the predecessors of Ali's "Postcard from Kashmir," Wallace Stevens's "A Postcard from the Volcano" (1936), speaks to the ways that material objects can absorb the impressions of those who knew them: "We knew for long the mansion's look / And what we said of it became // A part of what it is."¹⁶ Like twenty-first-century students reading postcards, Stevens's members of the next generation make sense out of the remnants of those who existed before as, immobile and silent, "the windy sky // Cries out a literate despair" (250). The house becomes a shiny portrait, "Smeared with the gold of the opulent sun" (251). Like Stevens, Ali adopts a concise form for his poem. He then takes on a longer form as he shifts his focus from a card that contains a photograph to the archive of words that remain in "The Country without a Post Office."

Early in the title poem of *The Country without a Post Office*, "Someone soaks the wicks of clay lamps / in mustard oil, each night climbs its steps / to read messages scratched on planets" (*Veiled Suite*, 202). This too may be an echo of Stevens's "The Planet on the Table," which closes, "It was not important that they survive. / What mattered was that they should bear / Some lineament or character, // Some affluence, if only half-perceived, / In the poverty of their words, / Of the planet of which they were part."¹⁷ Following the protagonist who holds the "half-inch Himalayas" in "A Postcard from Kashmir," Ali presents a more expansive image of handling

material in “The Country without a Post Office”: “His fingerprints cancel blank stamps / in that archive for letters with doomed / addresses, each house buried or empty” (202).

The second section of “The Country without a Post Office” opens with the voice of a message: “‘We’re inside the fire, looking for the dark,’ / one card lying on the street says. ‘I want / to be he who pours blood. To soak your hands. / Or I’ll leave mine in the cold till the rain / is ink, and my fingers, at the edge of pain, / are seals all night to cancel the stamps’” (203). Ali’s inclusion of a card is reminiscent of his previous image of postcards and suggests a formality, and perhaps even strength, that ordinary writing paper may not possess. Because of the floods that lead to this destruction, Ali’s long poem rewrites aspects of T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (1922). The fallen cards also allude to Madame Sosostris’s Tarot cards and instead of responding, “Fear death by water,” the author of Ali’s card imagines that rain will debilitate the speaker’s hands, remaining so that messages can be sent.¹⁸

The “archive” for Ali was an expansive collection preserved in memory and verse. In the third section of “The Country without a Post Office” the speaker concludes, “This is a shrine / of words. You will find your letters to me. And mine / to you” (204). Ali then closes the section’s final stanza: “This is an archive. I’ve found the remains / of his voice, the map of longings with no limit” (205). An archive records the impressions of what came before. In Ali’s poem “Vacating an Apartment,” published with “Postcard from Kashmir” in his collection *The Half-Inch Himalayas*, the speaker leaves “the corner table that memorized / my crossed-out lines” (*Veiled Suite*, 62). In personifying the table, Ali also suggests that it took care to preserve his ideas.

Ali’s own manuscripts have become part of *The Beloved Witness: Agha Shahid Ali Project, 1949–2001*, an Andrew Mellon Foundation Digital Humanities Initiative directed by Patricia O’Neill and Hena Ahmad.¹⁹ This resource will continue to redefine our sense of the transnational archive as it introduces new generations to Ali’s composition process and the contexts shaping his poetry. Like Ali’s “map of longings with no limit,” an archive is always expanding. As Lisa Stead observes, “For Paul Voss and Marta Werner, the archive is necessarily constituted by borders; it ‘is both a physical site—an institutional space enclosed by protective walls—and an imaginative site—a conceptual space whose boundaries are forever changing.’” Stead concludes, “Archives are incomplete sites of knowledge, nec-

essarily fragmentary and changeable.” This dynamic mirrors T. S. Eliot’s well-known explanation in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” that “the existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them.”²⁰ Each new detail changes our understanding of both the detail and the archive.

By sending postcards to Hecht, Ali was contributing artifacts that also complement his poem.²¹ With Ali’s digital archive and the digitization of other archives, we will be able to see the postcards he accumulated, which include the messages and images that shaped his sense of the genre.²² Archival materials are fragments, like the cards the speaker salvages in “The Country without a Post Office.” Anita Helle has observed that “Elizabeth Grosz’s definition of ‘text’ as a writer’s partial or incomplete body of work, scattered, but not incoherent, is relevant for its suggestion that archival memory is a multi-layered process, dependent on institutional forms of storage, access, and retrieval.”²³ When considering materials in archives, the contexts informing them extend from the locations in the texts to the spaces or digital displays mediating one’s experience.

The idea of the postcard also underscores the extent to which materials have traveled. As she pieces together Sylvia Plath’s time in New England using Plath’s husband Ted Hughes’s archive at Emory University, Helle refers to her account of this process as “A Postcard from Atlanta to Boston via Plymouth Rock.”²⁴ Considering Ali’s correspondence with Hecht from 1998 to 2000 similarly means routing through Atlanta, as Hecht’s archive is also located at Emory, to Northampton, New York, Kashmir, and Utah, where Ali composed messages, to Washington, D.C., where Hecht lived. When consulting Ali’s drafts of “Postcard from Kashmir,” we can also see the ability of archives to complicate and, as Helle puts it, “unravel” our existing sense of a text.²⁵

The drafts of “Postcard from Kashmir” record Ali’s negotiation of the voices of sender and receiver in the poem. An early typescript, dated October 12, 1979, is composed of three stanzas, the first two of which are enclosed in quotation marks. The first line of the poem resembles the published version, with the substitution of “your” for “my”: “Kashmir shrinks into your mailbox.”²⁶ This substitution continues throughout the draft. This version of the poem also replaces the persona’s feelings of inadequacy in the published version, “I always loved neatness,” with a potential sense of blame directed toward the recipient: “You always loved neatness, so now

hold / the half-inch Himalayas in your hand.” The draft is about missing a person as well as a place: “Things here are as usual— Though we always talk of you.” And closure of the second stanza resembles a letter, “We all send our love.” The final quatrain is not enclosed in quotation marks and captures the recipient’s reflection after reading the message: “In the dark room of my memory, / out of focus, / a giant negative, black / and white, lies undeveloped.” Ali’s next typescript, dated October 13, begins with the same two lines as the published version. He removed the final quatrain, so that the opening line is the only glimpse we have of the recipient’s thoughts. Ali also moved the quotation marks that were in the previous draft, so that the message begins, “You always loved neatness.”²⁷ The next typescript, also dated October 13, alternates the thoughts of the receiver with the message of the sender.²⁸ Both sender and receiver in the draft and published versions of the poem are from Kashmir. By contrast, in the postcards that Ali sent to Hecht, particularly in the second card, he introduced Kashmir to someone less familiar with it, continuing one of the functions that his poem serves for many readers.

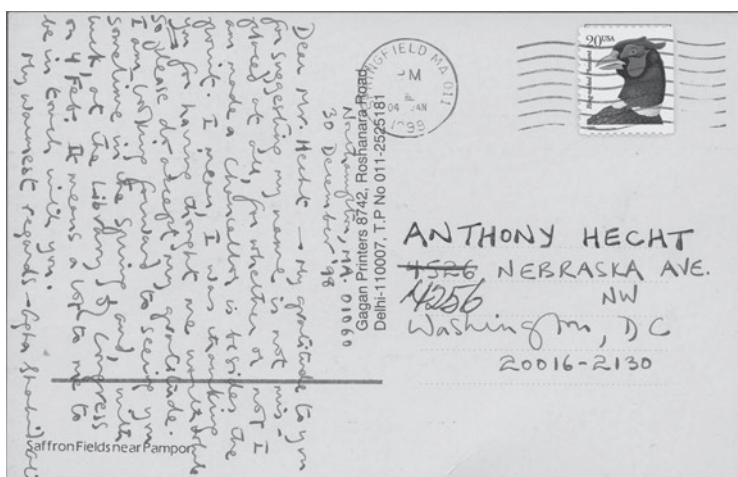
If Ali’s postcards to Hecht are items he handled after writing “Postcard from Kashmir” and “The Country without a Post Office,” then they anachronistically alter our reading of both texts. The idea that Ali himself, at a later point in time, selected the postcards he sent to Hecht allows us to imagine him a reader, encountering images that he too may have compared to what he envisioned in his poem. In postcards and archives we will continue to find materials that transform our interpretations of texts, lying behind pages and marking the tables on which we read.

Transcription:

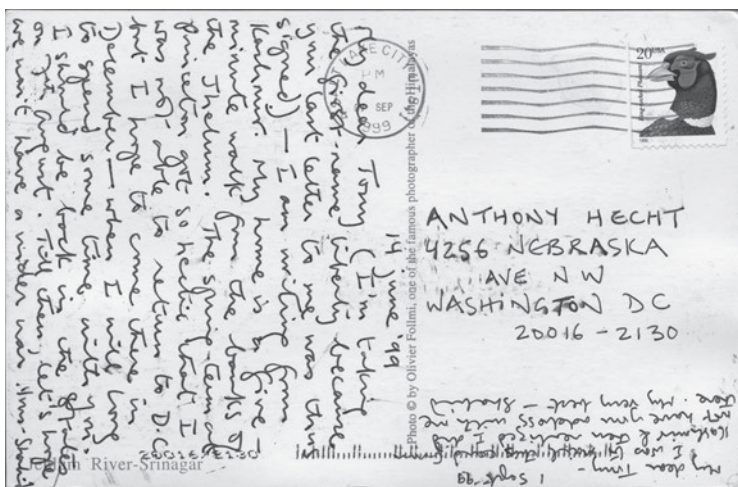
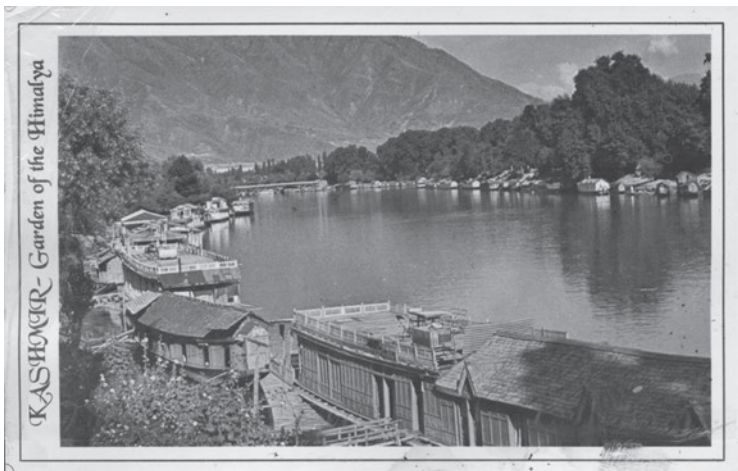
Green ink, Postmarked Springfield, MA 04 Jan 1999
Northampton, MA. 01060
30 December '98

Dear Mr. Hecht—My gratitude to you
for suggesting my name is not misplaced at all, for whether or not I
am made a chancellor is besides the
point. I mean, I was thanking
you for having thought me worthwhile.
So please do accept my gratitude.

K
A
S
H
M
I
R



I am looking forward to seeing you
sometime in the spring, and with
luck, at The Library of Congress
on 4 Feb. It means a lot to me to
be in touch with you.
My warmest regards—Agha Shahid Ali



Transcription:

Black ink

Postmark Salt Lake City, UT 1999

14 June '99

My dear Tony (I'm taking the first-name liberty because your last letter to me was thus signed).—I am writing from Kashmir. My home is a five-minute walk from the banks of

the Jhelum. The spring-term at
 Princeton got so hectic that I
 was not able to return to D.C.
 but I hope to come there in
 December—when I will long
 to spend some time with you.
 I should be back in the States
 on 7th August. Till then, let's hope
 we won't have a wider war. Yours—Shahid

Notes

1. I am grateful to Iqbal Ali and the Agha Shahid Ali Literary Trust for permission to publish the images of Ali's postcards. Agha Shahid Ali to Anthony Hecht, December 30, 1998, and June 14, 1999, postcards, box 8, folder 28, Hecht Papers. A Post-Doctoral Fellowship from Emory's Fox Center for Humanistic Inquiry enabled my use of this archive. I would also like to thank Brian M. Reed, Anita Helle, Mark Hussey, Karen V. Kukil, Peter K. Steinberg, Terry Kidner, Peter Balakian, Patricia O'Neill, Randi Saloman, and my students.

2. See "Postcard from Kashmir [Poem]," in O'Neill and Ahmad, *Beloved Witness*.

3. Ali to Hecht, October 24, 1994, box 8, folder 28, Hecht Papers.

4. Plath, *Unabridged Journals*, 692; *Directory of Smith College*, 10.

5. Ali to Hecht, October 25, 1998, box 8, folder 28, Hecht Papers.

6. Hecht to Ali, October 29, 1998, *ibid*.

7. Ali to Hecht, November 25, 1998, *ibid*.

8. Ali, *Veiled Suite*, 29.

9. Hecht to Ali, January 1, 1999, box 8, folder 28, Hecht Papers.

10. Ali to Hecht, January 14, 1999, *ibid*.

11. Hecht to Ali, January 21, 1999, *ibid*.

12. Ali to Hecht, June 14, 1999, *ibid*.

13. Karen Kukil, when teaching correspondence by members of the Bloomsbury Group at Smith College, adds that while published versions of the letters "tell us what was said, the original letters tell us how Bloomsbury communicated." Kukil, "Teaching the Material Archive," 177.

14. Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 221.

15. Derrida, *Post Card*, 13.

16. Stevens, "Postcard from the Volcano," 250.

17. Stevens, "Planet on the Table," 265.

18. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, 476.

19. "Project Details," in O'Neill and Ahmad, *Beloved Witness*, <http://www.dhinitiative.org/projects/belovedwitness/>. See also the project site, <http://asa.dhinitiative.org/>

20. Stead, introduction, 2; Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," 943.

21. Amy Hildreth Chen has addressed the way authors intervene in the construction of their archives. Chen, "Archival Bodies."
22. Woolley, "Poet Agha Shahid Ali's Legacy."
23. Helle, "Lessons from the Archive," 641.
24. Ibid., 646.
25. In her introduction to *The Unraveling Archive: Essays on Sylvia Plath*, Anita Helle observes, "What unravels, then, is the myth of monolithic memory" (7).
26. Ali, second typescript with annotations dated October 12, 1979, in O'Neill and Ahmad, *Beloved Witness*, <http://asa.dhinitiative.org/islandora/object/HamiltonShahid%3A21#page/3/mode/1up>
27. Ali, first typescript with annotations dated October 13, 1979, in O'Neill and Ahmad, *Beloved Witness*, <http://asa.dhinitiative.org/islandora/object/HamiltonShahid%3A21#page/4/mode/1up>
28. Ali, second typescript with annotations dated October 13, 1979, in O'Neill and Ahmad, *Beloved Witness*, <http://asa.dhinitiative.org/islandora/object/HamiltonShahid%3A21#page/6/mode/1up>

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RAVI SHANKAR

The Veiled Sweets

Agha Shahid Ali's Surprising Use of Humor

The headline of a recent newspaper article by Sadiq Ali reads, “Humorous Kashmiris Now Resort to Dark Humour.”¹ The article goes on to describe how the inhabitants of the war-marred land in the northwest corner of India, where Agha Shahid Ali hails from, exceedingly use black humor to mitigate the ongoing violence and absurd tug-of-war between India and Pakistan over a land that has been described as “heaven on earth” because of its resplendent natural beauty. According to the article, India’s prestigious IIT (India Institute of Technology) is short for International Institute of Terrorism, referring to the valley dwellers where the institute is located. In an exchange that could have been plucked out of a stanza of Shahid’s own work, the article adds, “Recently a teenage boy threatened his beloved by sending a message, ‘Talk to me or my heart will blow like a grenade.’”

According to psychologists, humor has often been used as an adaptive defense mechanism, especially in the face of stress. From the time of the 1848 March Revolutions, the Germans coined the phrase *galgenhumor*, or gallows humor, to indicate the ways in which cynical laughter can defuse the very real danger that might be prevalent. Another German, Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel, described this phenomenon in his memoir *Night*, showing how the prisoners of concentration camps often used humor as a buffer against the unremitting suffering they had to endure. There’s even an Italian phrase to that effect, *una risata vi seppellirà*, or “laughter will bury you.” As economist Martin Armstrong has written, “For a few moments, under the spell of laughter, the whole man is completely and gloriously alive: body, mind and soul vibrate in unison . . . the mind flings open its doors and windows . . . its foul and secret places are ventilated and sweetened.”²

Seen through that lens, it’s not surprising perhaps that Shahid, who prematurely lost a country and a mother, then indeed his own life, should be such a famous wit, his humor always leavened by

grief, his coquettish charm deepened with spiritual ardor. Take a poem like “Vacating an Apartment” from his collection *The Half-Inch Himalayas* (the title of the book itself an example of his sense of the absurd; the world’s tallest mountain range reduced to the proportions of a fingernail on a postcard), which begins,

Efficient as Fate,
each eye a storm trooper,

the cleaners wipe my smile
with Comet fingers
and tear the plaster
off my suicide note.

They learn everything
from the walls’ eloquent tongues.

Now, quick as genocide,
they powder my ghost for a cinnamon jar.

They burn my posters
(India and Heaven in flames),

whitewash my voicestains,

make everything new,
clean as Death.³

We’ve all moved at some point, but I daresay we have never experienced it as the speaker of Shahid’s poem does, with the eyes of the cleaners compared to stormtroopers, the cloned pop-cultural conscripts of the Galactic Empire in *Star Wars* with their signature white battle armor. The very paragons of inhuman efficiency. Amnesia inducers, the cleaners move through the home to wipe away the evidence of anyone’s presence with “Comet fingers.” Leave it to Shahid to seed in the subtle stellar reference within the name of the household cleaning product, though juxtaposed with a memory of his smile, it’s fairly clear what might still coruscate with cosmic dust. Plus, the melodrama of the suicide note plastered to a wall is darkly comic. Who *does* that except someone who doesn’t want to leave this earth?

Once the conceit has been established, I even find unexpected humor in the juxtaposition of genocide with cinnamon jar. I can’t

think of another poet who might have us grinning, however lopsidedly, at the specter of mass extermination, because our sensory mind has been triggered by the whimsy of a cinnamon jar. This speaker's room, intimate with voicestains that have to be white-washed away, show the trace of a past life with posters where India and heaven artificially incarnate. To find them in flames shouldn't be a source of pleasure, but because Shahid has masterfully tilted the scales of perspective so that we know that he knows that there's something so overreaching about comparing the cleaning of an apartment to a genocide, any other comparisons, like the idea of India in flames, have a certain dark humor, even as it is heartbreaking. The traces of the self, the indelible stains of whispers and shrieks, are forever removed and it is the poem's brilliance that allows this stark performance of mortality to be brought into comic relief though the use of an intentionally melodramatic device of personified death.

Other poems also foreground Shahid's cheeky wit, perhaps none more so than the one from *Rooms Are Never Finished* whose title is longer than the whole body of the verse: "On Hearing a Lover Not Seen for Twenty Years Has Attempted Suicide." The poem in its entirety reads,

I suspect it was over me. (295)

This is classic Shahid, the narcissist who mocks himself and takes something potentially tragic (suicide) and renders it as a source of flirtation and self-aggrandization. This is even funnier, in its grim way, when we consider that the speaker of these poems has revealed to us in an earlier book that his own suicide note was once plastered to the wall of his apartment and when that study in brevity is next to another memorable one-line found poem entitled "Suicide Note":

I could not simplify myself. (296)

Shahid's poems are never simple but rather elaborate artifices of loss and grief, papered over with passion, rendered in a signature style that is often, unexpectedly and intentionally, funny, proving what the eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher Francis Hutcheson described in his work *Logic, Metaphysics and the Natural Sociability of Mankind*: "Some of the things that happen to us appear

delightful, fitting, glorious, and honorable to us, while others seem vile and contemptible, and we may discern yet another reflexive sense: a sense of things that are ridiculous or apt to cause laughter, that is, when a thing arouses contrary sensations at one and the same time . . . we are moved to laughter by those which exhibit some splendid spectacle at the same time as a contradictory image of something cheap, lowly, and contemptible. This sense is very beneficial, whether in increasing the pleasure of conversation or in correcting men's morals."⁴

I think of Shahid's third book, *A Walk through the Yellow Pages*, as a hallmark of the incongruity that Hutcheson describes and as the funniest book that Shahid ever wrote. The title of the collection refers to the catchphrase that the Yellow Pages used to be described by—"let your fingers do the walking." The poetic sequence "Bell Telephone Hours" (85) deals explicitly with the moment of consumerism that we live in, so at odds with the magical, ritualistic place of our emotional lives. Each of the numbered sections of the poem is named with one of those catchphrases that pollute the airwaves—"Call long distance: the next best thing to being there" (86) or "It's getting late. Do your friends know where you are?" (87). In the poem these bits of commercial cliché are unpeeled like an onion to arrive at the void at the center of attempts to connect with one another. "Directory Assistance," one of the poems reads, "gave me the magic number/ for Necropolis, U.S.A." Another tells us, "I'm at the phone booth, / talking long distance to the dead. / This is the longest distance / I've called. And the bill is running up" (88).

What are poems if not calls placed into the ether, urgent messages to those who can no longer hear us, conversations we might have had if the facets of mortality didn't get in the way? To render such plaintive emotions in the language of commercial culture is funny, but again the kind of humor that doesn't make us simply chuckle as a Billy Collins poem might; rather we realize that the boundary between the comedic and the tragic is porous and that we laugh to keep from crying, to keep from dying. "I called Information Desk, Heaven, / and asked, 'When is Doomsday?' / I was put on hold." Who can't relate to that fact of contemporary life, the ceaseless waiting, the lack of resolution and annoyance of having to deal with such operators? And the idea that someone can call God directly is amusing, as if we could find out the answer to life's mysteries simply by picking up our receiver. The end of that section is existential humor at its bleakest and brightest: "God is busy. / He

never answers the living. / He has no answers for the dead. / Don't ever call again collect" (89).

Another poem from this collection, "Language Games" (92), seems on the surface to be an insider jibe at the turn in the poetry world toward "language poetry," defined by critic Marjorie Perloff as "the dismissal of 'voice' as the foundational principle of lyric poetry."⁵ Shahid's work is nothing if not the confabulation of voice, pitched against encroaching loss like the keening of furious angels. But like many of Shahid's poems, the criticism transcends mere poetics and the punning that takes place in this poem is delicious. We're presented with a Scrabble game where all the speaker's seven letters are vowels, anagrams for sleeping pills, a game of Truth AND (not *or*) Consequences, and a game of Charades, which, through Shahid's characteristic jocularity, gets at the dire seriousness of even the most frivolous language games:

Tableau One: I licked a saucer of milk.

You cried: CAT!

Tableau Two: I was stubborn as a mule.

You cried: ASS!

Tableau Three: I gave you my smile, like a prize.

You cried: TROPHY!

You cried: CAT-ASS-TROPHY?

You cried: CATASTROPHE!

Another poem from this collection, "Poets on Bathroom Walls" (95), begins with the speaker and his female poet friend "sipping our Miller Lites, you / announce you must take a break. / So you're off, dear girl, to those / remote regions where women do / sitting what I do standing." This is Shahid of the elaborate canzones and regal villanelles at his casual, American-idiom best, a throwaway suggestion of the difference between genders, but the poem doesn't stay on that register as light as the beer they sip on. Instead we move to the graffiti on a stall in a woman's bathroom and then, arrive as so many of the poems seem to do, at desire, the missed encounter, the belief in the redemptive quality of love, even that which takes the form of red lipstick scrawl in the remote regions of a stall. The world conspires against this memorialization of the missed encounter because of its illicit thrill.

A Walk through the Yellow Pages is filled with such comedic gems, droll and mordant poems, highbrow yet sardonic, never without the

sincere and deeply felt urge to leaven the dramatic flair with the spiritual. The fairy-tale poems in this collection are good examples, as they are inventive and also formally funny. Take “An Interview with Red Riding Hood, Now No Longer Little” (98), with the epigraph from Grimm’s original tale, “how dark it was inside the wolf.” Like Anne Sexton in her *Transformations*, Shahid uses the raw materials of the fairy tale and makes them his own song. While a Q-and-A with Red Riding Hood *seems* like it should be funny, just by sheer dint of importing the journalist’s form of the interview to bear on this mythical creature, the assertion we are left with at the end—“how warm it was inside the wolf!”—proves that Red Riding Hood craves that fetal consumption, being devoured and housed in the dark belly of the beast. Other poems in this sequence are macabre, like “Hansel’s Game,” which conjures Hansel and Gretel’s happily-ever-after life consisting of keeping the witch in an icebox and serving her up for special occasions, their old father washing her blood from the dishes. That’s a redemption grimmer than Grimm!

My favorite “funny” poem from this collection has to be “Christmas, 1980s,” which begins in typical witty and opalescent fashion:

In America
it is also the season of suicides

The trees light up red in shop-windows
What I touch is charged with voltage

I hear the lethal carols
as I make contacts
among Hell’s Angels (96)

Statistically speaking, the suicide rate bumps up during the holiday season. The counterpoint to the masses of gleeful children unwrapping excess under their glittering trees is the homeless vet poised along the steel girding of a bridge about to leap. The double entendre is brilliant as the speaker cruises among the grizzled members of a motorcycle gang, the synesthetic spirit of Hell’s Angels opening our pores to carnal song. The poem continues with a litany of first-person sentences. First one, then two, then three in a stanza, then a heart-stopping ending that seems to pin the tail on the American donkey:

I lift the phone

I dial a joke
I don't laugh

I call Cops for Christ
I call Murder, Inc.
I call Reverend Moon

I make an obscene call
to the White House

I light a candle in my window
brief for any doomed republic

the flame out (96)

Taken out of context, it's standup. But in the larger poem, the obvious humor becomes the backdrop, how the telephone is used as a prop, the way a latter-day Frank O'Hara might do it, putting the poem in Personism, "squarely between the poet and the person, Lucky Pierre style."⁶ The odd juxtaposition makes the connections more evident: the ministry of police officers dedicated to sharing the gospel are no different than the groups of organized crime are no different than a self-proclaimed Korean messiah are no different than the very synecdoche for American politics itself, the White House. There's humor here and yet the undercurrent is one of outrage, of disenfranchisement, and when that candle goes out—poof!—it's as if the veneer of Christmas has been dropped and what stares back at us is our own reflection disfigured in a void. Not that funny after all.

Throughout Shahid's work there's this vein of humor that catches us off guard, makes us laugh, then reconsider our laughing, and then reconsider our reconsidering. As Huma Dar has written in a moving tribute to him, "His [Shahid's] jokes, tinged with a very particular Kashmiri black humor—irreverent, risqué, ridiculous—mirrored my family's wacky one."⁷ Even in his final book, arguably his most austere, there are poems like "After You," which puns on the fact of hurricanes being given commonplace names. There's a great verbal pun in the first couplet of this ghazal—"no one is left in this world to be blamed after you"—then the poem goes on to

list the names of some of the year's hurricanes, from Andrew to George, though lamenting that, much to the speaker's chagrin, "S comes so late in the alphabet that although SHAHID DEVASTATES FLORIDA is your dream headline / no hurricane will be named after you" (372). Even in the colloquy of disaster names, Shahid is a perpetual exile and does not belong.

Throughout his work, when we least expect it, we are moved by his twinkling wisdom, which destabilizes us just when we have been considering such heavy, mournful subjects as perpetual loss. In an expansive, elegiac poem like "A Fate's Brief Memoir," there are always surprising moments when we are moved by the speaker's wit, as in the second section of the poem:

Are you feminists? YOU must be an athlete
to have climbed so neatly all this way to us.
We too outwit Ways we cannot defeat—

through dashes—so imagine! To become conscious
thus in this island universe—no past—
born cold holding steel in our hands? Jesus!

I never swear, but . . . notice the thinness
of breaths about to break. We recycle
them wholly black till their cobwebs incandesce

into—see those sheets: our letterheads: no last
name, just FATE FATE FATE and then for address
(cross it out!) ~~ETERNITY~~. *That* we've outclassed. (211)

To set aside the sonic mastery of the off-rhymes that begin and end the first and last line of each tercet, the humor of these stanzas is both subtle and overt, full of references and cheeky asides to other poets. Outwitting Ways that we cannot defeat, like Emily Dickinson, with dashes? One kind of burial by laughter. Another is the admission that the speaker never swears, which feels full of self-conscious deprecation and outright lie, especially when we know that later in his work Shahid will "seduce God Himself and fuck the sexless angels." Then finally that wonderful parenthetical in the final stanza, with its overt reference to Elizabeth Bishop telling herself to (*write it!*) in her villanelle "One Art."⁸ Here Shahid tells himself to do just the opposite and (cross it out!), which is what he does, taking no consolation in the afterlife, in what the fates might have

consigned for him. He can't go on, he must go on, and always with style.

Another section of the same poem proceeds:

I hold your breath. Look, I slow my fingers.
Do you now see why we give no interviews?
When you leave my hands will again be spiders.

What is this underlined? I hate VALUES . . .
I only prize a crisp prose: it sharpens
The dullest life. O, I've gone on. Well, spread this news:

PAST PRESENT FUTURE: not for us these prisons—
Like the *Norns*! What a name! One thing we know:
We won't be compared with our Icelandic cousins;

They have no manner . . . (212)

The logic of that first stanza above has the characteristic movement of a non sequitur, moving from the pun of “holding *your* breath,” instead of one’s own, to the rhetorical question about giving no interviews, to the surreal transformation of the hands into arachnids. The poem goes on to lambast capitalized “values,” like family values or any doctrinaire type of thinking that aims to homogenize us, then claims to prize only prose, a funny idea to express in a poem! And then the speaker catches himself with the conversational “O, I’ve gone on,” then proceeding go on some more, finally arriving at the *Norns*, the female beings in Norse mythology that are akin to the Fates in Greek mythology who determine the destinies of gods and men. These benevolent and malevolent beings were said to arrive when a person is born to help determine their destiny. Even while acknowledging their powers, the poem makes fun of their name and then disassociates any connection with them, claiming that they lack manner, both in the sense of style but also behavior. For after all, the Norse are most known for Vikings, who are uncouth marauders of the basest kind.

The poem continues to encompass mortality and desolation, not humorous subjects, not in the least, but it arrives at its capacious conclusion only through the veiled sweets of a gently ironic and playful sensibility. This is the case with many of Shahid’s poems, which are full-throated embodiments—and embroideries—of keen intelligence and rapturous emotion, always in light of the many

losses that the poet has—and will continue to suffer. According to another philosopher, the Danish existentialist Søren Kierkegaard, “humor is the last stage of existential awareness before faith,”⁹ and in Shahid’s poems, which orbit around matters of faith like a gravitationally compelled satellite, the comic is a stage of belief that through sheer force of will minimizes the great distance we have to travel to be reunited with our beloveds and merge with the divine. Wit is never merely witty in his work, but knotty, flirty, complex, resonant, and intimately close to the facts of aesthetics and mortality, which, because such subjects are no laughing matter, can’t help but make us smile, even laugh a little, maybe even riotously, full Rumi-throated howling in the face of those factotums and institutional killjoys who would patrol the borders of our imagination. Shahid might not have devastated Florida, but he devastates us, time and time again, in no small measure because he is so masterfully and agonizingly funny. So damn funny, I want to cry.

Notes

1. Sadiq Ali, “Humourous Kashmiris Now Resort to Dark Humour,” *Newstrack India*, June 15, 2007, <http://www.newstrackindia.com/newsdetails/331>
2. Qtd. in Nichole Force, “Humor as Weapon, Shield and Psychological Salve,” June 10, 2007, *Psych Central*, <http://psychcentral.com/lib/humor-as-weapon-shield-and-psychological-salve/0005629>
3. Agha Shahid Ali, *The Veiled Suite: The Collected Poems* (New York: Penguin Books, 2010), 61. Hereafter parenthetical references in the text refer to page numbers in this volume.
4. Francis Hutcheson, *Logic, Metaphysics, and the Natural Sociability of Mankind*, ed. James Moore and Michael Silverthorne (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2006), pt. 2, chap. 1.
5. Marjorie Perloff, “The Portrait of the Language Poet as Autobiographer,” *Quarry West*, January 1, 1998, 167–81.
6. Frank O’Hara, *The Collected Poems of Frank O’Hara*, ed. Donald Allen (New York: Knopf, 1971).
7. Huma Dar, “A Passport of the Country without a Post Office,” *P U L S E*, December 8, 2011, <http://pulsemedia.org/2011/12/08/a-passport-of-the-country-without-a-post-office/>
8. Elizabeth Bishop, *Poems, Prose, and Letters*, selected by Robert Giroux and Lloyd Schwartz (New York: Library of America, 2008).
9. Qtd. in John Morreall, “Philosophy of Humor,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, November 20, 2012, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/humor/>

ABIN CHAKRABORTY

Beyond Borders, Nations, and Exclusivist Identities

Agha Shahid Ali's Poetics of Plurality

Identities are indefatigably plural; despite the burgeoning rhetoric of civilizational clashes in a post-9/11 world, human identities cannot, in reality, be circumscribed within unidimensional notions of identity based on such markers as religious beliefs, political affiliations, nationalities, class, gender, and so on, which are all so many little boxes that cannot exclusively encompass the multiplicities within every self. Diasporas are often exposed to such identity-based dilemmas, anxieties, and conflicts, as not only is migration often imposed by the exigencies of political, ethnic, and/or sectarian violence of one kind or another but the host country itself may often become the site of such violence, which threatens the very survival of the migrant or, at the very least, imposes on him or her a sense of isolation and marginality that thwarts the possibility of any integration with the prevalent communities of the host country. This is precisely why the migrant repeatedly seeks what Salman Rushdie calls “imaginary homelands” (10) through which he or she may discover a lost wholeness, an absent plenitude that would help to relocate the moorings of the self. While such evocations of a mythical “home” may give rise to atavistic, regressive notions of identity, focused on some fixed essence of selfhood, the experience of migrancy may also open up horizons of solidarity that help to secure plural, branched-out paradigms of self and identity that lie beyond the striations of monochromatic modes of belonging where “singular affiliations” (Sen 20) of race, religion, or ethnicity may dominate. Diasporic identities are articulated in recognition of these contradictions and the multidirectional dialectics they engender.

These recurrent features of diasporic imagination are also vividly present in the poetry of Agha Shahid Ali, who was born in and spent much of his early years in Srinagar in Kashmir before moving to the United States in the seventies, where he then settled and

taught both literature and creative writing in various places. Quite naturally, therefore, like most other diasporic authors who build their “imaginary homelands,” shuttling between roots and routes, Agha Shahid Ali also reminisced, through verse, about the experiences of his beloved Kashmir:

Kashmir shrinks into my mailbox
My home a neat four by six inches

I always loved neatness. Now I hold
The half-inch Himalayas in my hand
This is home. And this is the closest
I'll ever be to home. (29)

Avtar Brah remarks that home refers not just to a mere geographic space but also to

the lived experience of a locality. Its sounds and smells, its heat and dust, balmy summer evenings, or the excitement of the first snowfall, shivering winter evenings, sombre grey skies in the middle of the day . . . all this, as mediated by the historically specific everyday of social relations. (189)

To contrast this world of lived experiences with the shrunk two-dimensional picture postcards that one receives from relatives and friends back “home” obviously heightens the sense of separation in more ways than one. The last two lines of Ali’s poem therefore tellingly emphasize this melancholia of exile, which keeps reappearing in other poems in different forms. Confronting his “undeveloped” hopes of a bond that is no longer rooted, he can only despondently declare,

I am a dealer in words
That mix cultures
And leave me rootless (King 260)

It is this sense of rootlessness that reappears again in a poem like “A Lost Memory of Delhi,” through the image of faded pictures:

They go into the house
always faded in photographs
in the family album (Ali 30)

The same drama is re-exercised in other poems where the search for one's roots takes the speaker into an examination of his own genealogy, through the route of opaque memories and decaying or fading pictures that further highlight the complications involved in such attempts. Even though he promises himself that he would "ride into the spring/ on their melting shoulders" (Ali 34), the decaying portraits of his ancestors undermine the validity of such endeavors:

Cobwebs cling
to the soundless
words of my ancestors

No one now comes from Kandahar,
dear Ali, to pitch tents by the Jhelum
under autumn maples
and claim descent from the holy prophet.

Your portrait is desolate
in a creaking corridor. (Ali 37)

The desolate pictures in the creaking corridors become vivid signifiers of the fading bonds with the past and the gradual but irreversible separation from one's roots, which would eventually become as absent as the extinct Dacca gauzes ("those too now lost") his grandmother so fondly remembered. Just as his grandmother longs for those muslins of yore, as opposed to the creations of the present, the speaker too yearns for the fulfilling emotional experience of his native land, as opposed to his chosen life in a foreign land. Therefore, even as he grapples with the fact of being "thirteen thousand miles from home" (Ali 81), he continues to envision "the cold full moon of Kashmir" (Ali 76), which oxymoronically alludes to both the plenitude of home and the agony of separation.

However, Agha Shahid Ali's nostalgia neither operates on the basis of an atavistic celebration of the past nor does it foreground essentialist identities into which individuals may be neatly packed as commodities in a supermarket. Despite the references to Kandahar, which is more familiar to us as a Taliban stronghold, popularized by the US invasion of Afghanistan, than anything else, or the reference to the descent from the Holy Prophet, the varied selves that Ali manages to project through his poetry are far from being exclusively Islamist. Bereft of those strains of paranoia or extremism or

resentment that Edward Said points out in his “Reflections on Exile,” Ali’s poetry rather serves to provide a cultural framework of fluid plurality that fashions the self according to that same ethic of harmonious heterogeneity that characterizes his memories, as exemplified in his interview with Christine Benvenuto:

“There were three languages, Urdu, Kashmiri and English, spoken at home all the time, and poetry recited in these languages, and poets and musicians visiting and I would say it was culturally a very rich atmosphere,” Ali recalled. “There was never a hint of any kind of parochialism in the home.” The family’s tolerance extended to religion and Ali was educated at an Irish Catholic school, simply because that was the elite institution in Kashmir. “When I was a kid, I remember telling my parents that I wanted to build a little Hindu temple in my room, and they said sure. And then once I said I wanted to build a Catholic chapel with pictures of Jesus, and they said sure, they brought me statues of Jesus, they brought me statues of Krishna, they said go ahead, build your temple. It was a wonderful atmosphere, full of possibilities of self-expression.” (262)

This is precisely why he has always resisted all those labels that critics and scholars keep devising to categorize authors:

Critics, interviewers and newspaper writers always want to put you into a slot: you are an Indian writing in English, therefore, you should write about India, Kashmir, Pakistan or whatever. The point is, you are a universe, you are the product of immense historical forces. There is the Muslim in me, there is the Hindu in me, there is the Western in me. . . . I have grown up . . . with various permutations of these cultures. (C. Chambers para 2)

This becomes evident from such lines as the following, where cultural signifiers from different religious strands merge and mingle with lilting lyrical grace:

The monsoon, when Krishna’s
flute is heard on the shores
of the Jamuna. She played old records
of the Benaras thumri singers

Siddheswari and Rasoolan, their
voices longing, when the clouds
gather, for that invisible
blue god. (Ali 440)

An English-educated Muslim diasporic poet's imagination thus smoothly assimilates Radha-Krishna's mutual longing with the resonance of thumri songs, enjoyed by his mother, that were previously associated with the *tawaifs*¹ of Nawabi Lucknow. And these merge again, within the same poem, with the legends of Heer and Ranjha's forbidden love. These enmeshed pluralities repeatedly characterize his memories as he recalls,

Grandfather, a handsome boy,
Sauntered towards madness
into Srinagar's interior.
In a dim-lit shop he smoked hashish,
reciting verses of sufi mystics.
My father went to bring him home

As he grew older, he moved towards Plato,
mumbling "philosopher-king",

Napoleon on his lips . . .

In his cup
Socrates swirled. (Ali 36)

This eclectic combination of diverse religious, political, cultural, and philosophical sources together creates the rhizomic nodes along which identities are fashioned and refashioned in a world of open-ended possibilities without closure. The same confluence could be seen also in Ali's repeated references to the musical genius of Begum Akhtar, whose effortless mastery in both ghazals and ragas made her a celebrated emblem of those syncretic cultural forms that continue to defy the dictates of theological purists of one kind or another. And it is this defiance that again shines through as he envisions how in his Kashmir "In the lake the arms of temples and mosques are locked/in each other's reflections" (Ali 176). The vision of home that emerges in the process is also one that is marked by a relished multiculturalism associated with the imagined nation-space of both Kashmir and India. At a time when theories of a clash of

civilizations have gained greater momentum, when the subcontinent itself continues to convulse with fundamentalisms of one kind or another, such pluralities are more significant than ever.

This convergence of pluralities is, to a large extent, a significant part of Ali's Kashmiri heritage. Despite a predominantly Muslim population, Kashmir has always boasted of a syncretic culture in which the different strands of Hindu, Muslim, and Buddhist culture have merged and mingled with seamless ease. In fact, during the partition of India, Kashmir was one of the few places that remained unaffected by the fire of communal conflicts that had engulfed much of the subcontinent. This historical reality owes much to the fact that religious identity in Kashmir was historically much more influenced by fluid interactions between different religious cultures that dated back to precolonial times and even continued after the acceptance of Islam by a majority of Kashmiris. As Suranjan Das explains,

Interactions between Kashmiri, Vedic and Buddhist traditions gave birth to a syncretic school of philosophy in Kashmir, the two best exponents of which were Vasugupta (9th century AD) and Abhinav Gupta (10th century AD). Subsequently, Kashmir accepted Islam, although not as a negation but as a culmination of a proud spiritual heritage. Islam in Kashmir has, accordingly, an autonomy of its own, retaining many pre-Islamic practices. (25)

Such was indeed the ambiance of amity and harmony that several shrines, such as Charar-i-sharif, or mosques like the Shah-i-Hamdan mosque, until recently continued to be visited by both Hindus and Muslims together. In other words, the typical hybridity that we note in Ali's poetry is a product not just of his personal sensibility or his familial background but also of the larger cultural plurality that is associated with the ethnolinguistic entity of "Kashmiriyat." Unfortunately a distorted process of nationbuilding in India, which failed to recognize the strength of this entity, combined with geopolitical conflict with Pakistan and the rise of indigenous right-wing Hindu fundamentalism in India, has led to a gradual Islamization of Kashmiriyat, which in turn has corroded those earlier syncretic values that Ali and his family embodied. While on the one hand the central government of New Delhi, for several political and diplomatic reasons, continuously curtailed the autonomy Nehru had once promised to Sheikh Abdullah, the first elected chief

minister of Kashmir and leader of the National Conference, the rise of Hindu fundamentalism in Indian politics contributed to a gradual political resentment among the predominant Muslim community, who felt that their valid aspirations were being betrayed, in spite of the fact that many of them had chosen to belong to India on account of its secular credentials after 1947. This political resentment against Delhi, along with widespread economic crisis, created a volatile political scenario that contributed to the growth of a sinister Islamic fundamentalism that not only usurped the cherished multiculturalism of Kashmiriyat but also fomented a massive terrorist movement, with overt and covert support from Pakistan and other Muslim-dominated countries, that plunged the valley into a phase of prolonged violence.

This was obviously not a unidirectional assault, as the federal government of India retaliated with large-scale military interventions, complemented by special laws and constitutional provisions that gave armed forces extraordinary powers over civic life.² In the process, the valley of Kashmir, a place whose legendary beauty caused it to be called “Paradise on Earth,” was turned into a desolate inferno marked by the corpses of innocents and the processions of the internally displaced who suddenly became aliens in their own homeland.

This apparently digressive and excessively brief account of the turmoil in Kashmir is important to contextualize Ali’s poetry and understand the new dimension of loss that would emerge in his later poetry. While the initial anthologies, such as *Half-Inch Himalayas* and *A Nostalgist’s Map of America*, revolve around the familiar tropes of exile, estrangement, and self-avowed nostalgia, his later poems, especially those in *A Country without a Post Office*, poignantly depict the trauma and agony of violence, hatred, and dislocation that tragically rent apart the rich history of harmony, tolerance, and syncretic practices that made Kashmir so special. Avtar Brah explains that it is crucial to take into account, while documenting diasporic representations, “an interpretive frame referencing the economic, political and cultural dimensions of these contemporary forms of migrancy” (183; emphasis original). Agha Shahid Ali’s later poetry also demands such a contextualization as it bemoans the destructive violence unleashed by all sides. As a result, the natural beauties of the mountains and the valleys or the memories of familial warmth, so recurrently present in the earlier volumes, now give way to a stark documentation of infernal carnage:

But the reports are true, and without song: mass rapes in villages, towns left in cinders, neighbourhoods torched. "Power is hideous/like a barber's hands." The rubble of downtown Srinagar stares at me from the *Times*. (Ali 173)

There is no doubt that Ali is appalled by the unchecked violence that was unleashed by the Indian army and its associate forces. In fact, several human rights organizations, newspaper reports, and scholarly studies have successively blamed the Indian forces for perpetrating several atrocities, including torture of detainees, rapes against women, "disappearance" of detained boys, fake encounters, unlawful arrests, and multiple massacres.³ A panel report of the Press Council of India states,

Human rights cannot be safe in (the rest of) India if they are trampled upon . . . in Kashmir. Such violations are brutalising and threaten the democratic edifice of the country. More precisely, far from subduing aggrieved communities, Kashmiris in this case, they can only alienate them further, especially if their women are dishonoured and their collective psyche hurt. (qtd. in Das 66)

It is this brutality that haunts Ali's vision of Kashmir as he notes,

From windows we hear
grieving mothers, and snow begins to fall
on us, like ash. Black on edges of flames,
it cannot extinguish the neighbourhoods,
the homes set ablaze by midnight soldiers. (Ali 179)

The most important feature of these lines is a newfound sense of collective identity as the diasporic poet no longer dwells on his own experiences as that of an isolated individual but rather, journeying from "I" to "We," locates himself as one of a grieving, suffering, tormented community who have forever lost "those days of peace when we all were in love and the rain was in our hands wherever we went" (Ali 195). This refashioning of the self as being part of a victimized community is also reaffirmed through his allusion to Yeats's "Easter 1916," where Yeats immortalizes the sacrifice and martyrdom of Irish revolutionaries. Ali exclaims,

Now and in time to be,
Wherever green is worn . . .
A terrible beauty is born. (Ali 176)

The Irish green is here transformed into the green of Islam, which would inspire the young Kashmiri terrorists to rise against the Indian state to retaliate against the murders of innocent men and women that inevitably take place during such periods of political unrest.

Such a realignment may indicate a dissolution of Ali's earlier poetic self in favor of a more explicitly Islamic one, which also makes him identify his plight as a Kashmiri-Muslim settled elsewhere with the plight of people from Serbia, Chechnya, or Palestine, as evident from such lines as the following:

Say farewell, say farewell to the city
(O Sarajevo! O Srinagar!)
the Alexandria that is forever leaving.
I'm running toward a barbed-wire fence
And someone is running after me . . . (Ali 230)

As Avtar Brah remarks, "Diasporic identities are at once local and global. They are networks of transnational identifications encompassing 'imagined' and 'encountered' communities" (192). Ali's "imaginary homeland" of Kashmir thus becomes associated with other sites of similar unrest to create a transnational "map of longings with no limits" (Ali 205) that combines, in an apparently paradoxical move, the "non-limited locality" (Casey 304) of diasporic imagining with a rediscovered emphasis on the religious identity of being a Muslim. It is from this perspective that Claire Chambers remarks,

As a Kashmiri-American, Shahid wants to look at Kashmir from a broader perspective than the local geopolitics of South Asia. He achieves this by drawing comparisons with conflicts elsewhere in the world—Bosnia, Chechnya, and Palestine—in an approach that is humanist, but also alert to the sufferings of Muslim peoples in recent history. (para 14)

Such an assessment, however, falls short of acknowledging the play of ceaseless pluralities that marks the dynamics of Ali's poetry

at all stages. Despite acknowledging the suffering of various Muslim communities around the world, Ali neither absolves the crimes of the terrorists themselves nor seeks to confine himself only within a religious identity. Instead, his persistent humanist rhetoric takes us to a world where the very categories of believer and infidel, which act as the fulcrum of fundamentalist, terrorist violence, cease to operate, as evident from the following lament for Hans Christian Ostro, a Norwegian hostage assassinated by the terrorists.

Bruised by trust O Heart bare amidst
fire arms turquoise with veins

from love's smoke-minesblessed infidel
who wants your surrender?
I cannot protect you: these are my hands . . .

And draped in rain
of the last monsoon-storm,
a beggar, ears pressed to that metal-cry,
will keep waiting on a ghost-platform
holding back his tears, waving every train
Good-bye and Good-bye. (Ali 236–37)

Such oxymoronic appellations ('blessed infidel') are only born out of a sensibility that rejects outright the very discursive structure that makes possible the identification of some as infidel and again moves us toward those horizons of plenitude where none of us are imprisoned in closed, parochial, monolithic boxes of identity. In fact, the poem also testifies to emotions of guilt and loss that are evoked by the tears of the beggar who bids farewell. Symbolically, the farewell is extended to all those prospects of peace and harmony that once characterized Kashmir but have now turned improbable. It is this persistent longing that makes the poetic voice identify with people from both sides of the religious divide to articulate a unanimous note of loss. Therefore, in a poem reminiscent of Wilfred Owen's "Strange Meeting," we witness how the victim and victimizer are fused into one single identity that is drenched with the agony of all the bloodshed that has gone into the enforcement of their separation:

At a certain point I lost track of you.
You needed me. You needed to perfect me:
In your absence you polished me into the Enemy.

Your history gets in the way of my memory.
I am everything you lost. Your perfect enemy . . .
If only somehow you could have been mine,
what would not have been possible in the world? (Ali 176–77)

These dialogues of you and I, between a Kashmiri Muslim and his Hindu, pandit counterpart, refer to the construction of those fictive binaries that sow between men what Amitav Ghosh, Ali's dear friend, would call "shadow lines." Ali is always aware of the insubstantiality of such divisions and therefore adopts for himself the name Ishmael in a poem that intertwines all the sacred markers of different religions to produce a syncretic confluence of diversities:

Has God's vintage loneliness turned to vinegar?
He's poured rust into the Sacred Well tonight.

In the heart's veined temple all statues have been smashed.
No priest in saffron's left to toll its knell tonight.

He's freed some fire from ice, in pity for Heaven;
he's left open—for God—the doors of Hell tonight.

And I, Shahid, only am escaped to tell thee—
God sobs in my arms. Call me Ishmael tonight. (Ali 193)

According to Jehan Ramazani, the name Ishmael serves here as "an intercultural node in which Judaism, Christianity, and Islam intersect, as they have in the poem's formal junctures and syncretic layerings" (104). No wonder, when praised by Amitav Ghosh as the only national poet of Kashmir, Ali pithily remarked, "A national poet, maybe. But not a nationalist poet; please not that" (Ghosh 14). Reluctant to embrace all constricting *-isms* or the homogeneity nations at times compulsively enforce, Ali reveled in what Bill Ashcroft would elsewhere call "the rhizomic interplay of travelling subjects within and between the nations" (11).

It is this rhizomic interplay of affiliations, however fantastic it may seem, that continues to resonate, even in his final poems:

Where isn't he from? He's brought the sky from Vail,
Colorado, and the Ganges from Varanasi
In a clay urn (his heart measures like the sea).

He's brought the desert too . . .
What hasn't he planned? For music Debussy,
then a song from New Orleans in the *Cresecent's*
time nearing Penn Station. (Ali 23)

All kinds of geographical and cultural nodes thus merge in Ali's poetry to fabricate visions of selfhood that refuse to be bound by any of those limits that identities based on singular affiliations insist on. As one whose sustained emotional engagement with his troubled homeland teaches him all too well, acceptance of plurality is essential. Therefore, those syncretic visions that Ali had nursed from his childhood, which he had protected even amid the violence in Kashmir, in his poems, throughout his life, have given birth to conglomerates that hover beyond the pale of binaries, boxes, and boundaries. It is these visions that make Ali imagine the previous occupant of his rented room, from Chile, to be an inalienable friend:

There's enough missing
For me to know him. On the empty shelves
Absent books gather dust: Neruda, Cavafy
I know he knew their poetry, by heart
The lines I love. (Ali 63)

It is this transnational awareness of the migrant that creates new routes for the articulation of identity that flows into what Edward Casey calls a "deeply localized nomad space" (304) based on what Said defines as "an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that—to borrow a phrase from music—is *contrapuntal*" (172). The room thus becomes that space of "contrapuntal" dimensions where distant lands like India and Chile mingle with each other through an imagination that constantly negotiates between "roots" and "routes." As Benzi Zhang remarks, "Modern diaspora . . . evokes an interaction among different cultural passages, challenges homogeneous modes of belonging, and suggests a de-territorialized construction of new identity that is both immediately local and yet mediated by the wide world" (151). This is exactly what Agha Shahid Ali's poetry consistently performs, and therefore the speaker who once saw Chile in his rearview mirror is able to assert,

But no detergent will rub his voice from the air
Though he has disappeared in some country
As far as Chile. (Ali 63)

Such visions open the space of the text for the forging of many such ties across borders and beyond essentialist constructs that are as important for postcolonial nation-states like India and its own concerns regarding minorities and separatism as they are for the framing of contested diaspora identities.

It is this particular sensibility, which Ali shares with other diasporic authors, that makes Iain Chambers argue,

Identities are articulated across the hyphen, the transition, the bridge or passage between, rather than firmly located in any one culture, place or position. . . . For if, as Vijay Mishra insists, diasporas do not have a teleology then they invariably disturb narratives of national identities, and their particular utopias, by failing to register such local, invariably ethnically bound, futures. They scramble and confuse the teleological narrative of national identity. To insist on this doubling, and displacement, of culture and nationhood is to focus on the side of modernity that is linked less to nationalism and more to trans- and extra-national worlds. (53)

Therefore, in complete disregard of global politics, not only can Ali proclaim, "By the Hudson lies Kashmir, brought from Palestine" (Ali 297), but he can even reverse in his imagination those geographies of separation, which were as much enforced by colonial cartography as by indigenous fundamentalisms of one kind or another:

So what is separation's geography?
Everything is just that mystery
everything is this roar that deafens:
this stream has branched off from the Indus,
in Little Tibet, just to
find itself where Porus

miles down (there it will join the Jhelum)
lost to the Greeks. It will become
in Pakistan, the Indus again. (Ali 276)

The trajectory of the river, which moves across both historical ages and fabricated borders, creates those maps of the heart that refuse to abide by international borders and lines of control. Instead it creates a new cartography of its own that not only harks back to the original unity of the subcontinent but also seems to suggest that just as

the same river is known by different names, the supposed differences that we so privilege to assert our unique identities, at times violently, only distract us from those original bonds of shared humanity that we cannot deny.

For Ali, the source of this poetics of plurality lies in his multiple memories, rooted in separate geographic locales, scattered across national boundaries. Memory becomes for him both a path to his own origins and a route beyond those originary narratives for a hundred different identities which, however, all celebrate that plurality that adorned his childhood memories. Ali therefore is not only able to assert, "Memory, no longer confused, now is a homeland" (Ali 372) but also highlights possibilities for a future, however fantastic that may be. It is particularly apposite in this context to recall the remarks of Bill Ashcroft, who claims,

Memory is the smooth space that flows through and around the striated space of history, the space of the nation state and all structures of fixed identity. Ironically, memory through the medium of literature becomes the vehicle of potentiality rather than stasis. . . . This space of transformation, this space of literature, is the smooth space of the transnation. (21–22)

Agha Shahid Ali's poetry, with its repeated returns to memory, also moves toward this smooth space that takes shape, according to Ashcroft, when "the striated space of government institutions, fixed concepts and essentialized peoples are broken into their composing forces" to produce new forms that "may defy the categorizing machines of the institutions of striated space" (12). As already explained, the abiding significance of Ali's poetry is precisely this defiance of striated spaces, bellicose categories, and oppressive hierarchies based on the envisioning of those horizons of plenitude that we may term "utopia" for our convenience. Such a utopia, which Ali may hail as "The Ghat of the Only World" (Ali 313), is as much necessary for nation-states in the so-called West as it is for postcolonial states elsewhere. It is highly unlikely that Agha Shahid Ali's poetry will have any healing effect on Kashmir and subcontinental politics, especially as he writes in English. However, Seamus Heaney once remarked that "I can't think of a case where poems changed the world, but what they do is they change people's understanding of what's going on in the world" (O'Donoghue 69). In his own way, Agha Shahid Ali's poetics of plurality has the power to do just that,

as it too speaks on behalf of Heaney's "Republic of Conscience," to which we are all invited.

Notes

1. *Tawaijs* is an Urdu term referring to courtesans who sang and danced for their elite guests, a practice that flourished especially during the Mughal era. While they were often subjected to moralistic vilification and equated with prostitutes, sexual encounters were neither contractual nor compulsory but rather occasional.

2. I am largely indebted to Suranjan Das's analysis for this particular section. Interested readers may look up Das's chapter "The Kashmir Imbroglia," 21–89.

3. Fake encounters are extra-judicial murders which are often passed off as encounters to avoid criticism, controversy, and punishment. The valley of Kashmir has seen several such incidents—some admitted or exposed and subjected to judicial processes, others concealed and unacknowledged.

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AMY NEWMAN

“Separation’s Geography”

Agha Shahid Ali’s Scholarship of Evanescence

It seems proper that those who create art in a civilization of quasi-barbarism, which has made so many homeless, should themselves be poets unhoused and wanderers across language.

—GEORGE STEINER

It is tempting to read Agha Shahid Ali as an Indian poet writing in English, poised under the mantle of postcolonial literature, or as a Kashmiri American, the title he finally settled on himself. As tempting is to read Ali as an exile in the conventional sense of the term, since his homeland was not North America, though he spent most of his adult life there. Though his poetry is dense with the landscapes of pre- and postpartition India and of his travels through and transitions to America, his nostalgia is extraterritorial. It is not limited to the borders and waters between countries but extends to the boundaries of human longing, dissolving postcolonial categorizations and etching poetry of an immaterial rather than a geographic exile. In an article in *Middle East Report*, Michael Fischer suggests that Ali “reminds us of the ways in which so many different identities suffer in a family of resemblance that makes all of us family, however woundedly antagonistic.”¹ Ali’s championing of the ghazal form is especially significant, as the ghazal and its history mirror the physiological state of the human in eternal exile, in a nostalgic search for a lost paradise. The poet’s career is a narrative of the intricacies of loss, the evocation of estrangement as the true state of the human condition, and the drive to reassemble the world as a response to such disposessions. As his oeuvre matured, his reliance on traditional forms increased. In Ali’s final three books, *A Nostalgist’s Map of America* (1991), *The Country without a Post Office* (1997), and *Rooms Are Never Finished* (2002), the poet houses his increasing awareness of dislocation and death in a number of poetic forms, offering temporary shelter for a voice that sings of the transience of existence.

In *Reflections on Exile* Edward Said defines exile as “the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted. . . . Like death but without death’s ultimate mercy, it has torn millions of people from the nourishment of tradition, family, and geography.”² By conventional definition, an exile is one who has been separated from his country; the term houses both those who have chosen to live elsewhere and those banished by decree. Yet we limit its possibilities when we endeavor to understand exile only in its conventional usage.

The Bible begins as a story of exile, and exile may gloss the burden of the unknown, the nongeographic wandering and wondering that humans experience. Though established categories are useful for critical approaches, when studying the poetic voice one must consider the condition of the human in spiritual as well as in secular terms. The doctrine of salvation underlying the world’s major religions postulates that in our earthly forms, we are in a spiritual condition of prefulfillment and that the human condition is saturated with this sense of the limits of knowing. The garden, the mother’s womb, the childhood home, and the countries one leaves may each be read as a stage in a journey away from or toward perfection, as though when we were driven *from* paradise, we were exiled *into* the human condition. Poetry, concerned with the human voice, is a record of that journey.

Ali created a renaissance of sorts for the ghazal, a form of poetry that he dates back to seventh-century Arabia.³ While the United States had its dabblers in the form, for Ali, those dabbling were hardly writing ghazals at all. There was first the matter of the rules of the form, as Ali notes:

The opening couplet (called *matla*) sets up a scheme (of rhyme—called *qafia*; and refrain—called *radif*) by having it occur in both lines—the rhyme IMMEDIATELY preceding the refrain—and then this scheme occurs only in the second line of each succeeding couplet. That is, once a poet establishes the scheme—with total freedom, I might add—she or he becomes its slave.⁴

There are additional conditions (the poet names himself in the last couplet, for instance), yet as with contemporary sestinas that are simply six-line stanzas, or sonnets whose sole adherence to the form is to be found in the poem’s having fourteen lines, some ghazals are

considered ghazals simply because they are so called. But to discard the formal requirements is to miss the point of the form, which is to contribute to the poem's series of competing forces. To avoid the *matla*, *qafia*, or *radif* is to ask the ghazal to lose its blood, its underlying resemblance to life itself. In a 2002 interview with Christine Benvenuto, Ali takes issue with poets such as Adrienne Rich and James Harrison for this very reason: "Though I like things they have done with what they call ghazals, those are not ghazals, they simply aren't."⁵

At the same time that the poem is expressing an underlying fidelity within its ranks based on this interwoven pattern of rhyme and repetition, each couplet within must express a notion of sovereignty, of independence. This internal complication generates an accumulating sense of simultaneous disunities and unities. A true ghazal insists upon both the rule of rhyme and repetition and the autonomy of each couplet in the form. Laced together, the couplets merge into a fully realized ghazal, resonant of both independence and a near simultaneous resolution of repeated sound. A ghazal's *radif* and *qafia* give it, as Ali writes in *The Rebel's Silhouette: Selected Poems by Faiz Ahmed Faiz*, a "peculiar fragrance . . . its constant sense of longing."⁶ The self-reliant couplet sings its sovereignty, yet the *radif* and *qafia* confirm repeatedly that the couplet is in fact enslaved. Roam in autonomy as the couplet may, it will always be reminded of return. A form that simultaneously embraces independence and linkage would be attractive to a poet who is so deeply interested in the condition of the exile and its attendant heartbreak, as Ali writes in *Ravishing DisUnities: Real Ghazals in English*: "Remember one definition of the word ghazal; It is the cry of the gazelle when it is cornered in a hunt and knows it will die. Thus, to quote Ahmed Ali: 'the atmosphere of sadness and grief that pervades the ghazal . . . reflects its origin in this' and in the form's 'dedication to love and the beloved.'"⁷

It is no coincidence that Ali should have found in this form his strength as a writer. In the first ghazal he wrote,⁸ the final couplet is a telling discovery for both the poet and his readers. "They ask me to tell them what Shahid means— / Listen: It means 'The Beloved' in Persian, 'witness' in Arabic."⁹ That Ali should be a witness, and also stand for love, underlines Ahmed Ali's reminder that the ghazal is both "melancholic and amorous."¹⁰ One may imagine that the cry of a gazelle when it is cornered and foresees its death would contain something akin to witnessing: fear, knowledge, regret, and grief, and then, certainly, love for the vanishing world.

The arc of Ali's poetic career may be read as the personal evolution of this condition. The poet was an exile in the conventional sense of the term, having spent most of his adult life in a country that was not his own. His poetry reflects back on the changing landscapes of India, initially focusing on his childhood in New Delhi but shifting in later work to the Kashmir he loved, which since 1947 had suffered brutally in the dispute between India and Pakistan. He consciously plays with the term of exile: in some places he refers to himself as a "multiple-exile"¹¹ and yet with Benvenuto insists that the condition didn't apply to him or his work. "I say please don't be so fussy about it. The airplanes work. I mean, if you have a certain kind of income, whether you live in Bombay and fly to Kashmir, or you live in New York and fly to Kashmir, for a certain group it really makes no difference."¹² Readers familiar with Ali's work can identify his roots—his family, friends, and his beloved Kashmir. Yet the creation of and insistence on the existence of roots is a part of the "emotional resonance" of the exile;¹³ if he is to endure life, an exile must attempt to deny his essentially rootless, wandering state.

One who is both rooted and emotionally exiled therefore roosts in contradiction, a landscape of tension between continuity and dislocation. Similarly, since form offers the comfort of a historical and social body, Ali's later appropriation of, in addition to the ghazal, complex traditional forms such as canzones, pantoums, sestinas, terza rimas, and villanelles suggests that the poet sought traditional structures of solidity within which the present could exist, however temporarily, a home within which the individual's voice wanders, grieves, and ultimately sings.

Initially Ali uses the word *exile* as poetic vocabulary. Bruce King finds in Ali's early work *Bone-Sculpture* (1972) "clichés of exile and biculturalism" but also the "stronger images" of "a now dead world that will not reply to his interest."¹⁴ Early in his career his poetry locates the past in India, in his mother's and father's homelands; later his experience places the transparencies of his past over his present in a shifting of alternative landscapes. The differing topographies share amassing histories of loss. In his penultimate collection, *The Country without a Post Office*, Kashmir stands for all landscapes of suffering and for the lost paradise. In his final book, *Rooms Are Never Finished*, the poet returns with his mother's body to their devastated homeland for her burial, this journey a bereavement of his two essential roots. The nostalgias the poet practices begin as memory for

lost cultures and peoples and become over time the nostalgia of the heart, a cry like that of a gazelle for its accumulated losses.

One may study the titles for a short narrative of compounding ruptures: *A Walk through the Yellow Pages* (1987) will share with Ali's future book titles a desire to grasp distance through contrivance (here the telephone, and in later work the postcard, the post office, the map) and the hollow substitutes for traversing, recording, and overcoming distance that these resources may provide. As does a true postcard, the postcard trope of *The Half-Inch Himalayas* (1987) evokes distance and homesickness, suggesting we are severed from home's true dimensions. The title is from the fourth line of "Postcard from Kashmir":

Kashmir shrinks into my mailbox,
my home a neat four by six inches.

I always loved neatness. Now I hold
the half-inch Himalayas in my hand.

This is home. And this is the closest
I'll ever be to home.¹⁵

Here the poet finds his origins neatly arranged for him in a limited space. It is a considerable act of physics to shrink the Himalayan mountain range down to two dimensions. Whatever is real, textural, tactile, and memorable about the vast range of mountains is lost in this tiny reproduction, shrunk from the true subject; implicit in the act of reduction is the accompanying lifelike dissolution of a landscape of home. True color or no, a picture can only contain image, after all. All else that is associated with the Himalayas has to relocate to memory and imagination and, therefore, find a home now only in desire. The poet thus implies connection and distance simultaneously. As witness and storyteller of family and continental history, and as one who through this retelling continues to embrace the dissolving past, Ali conjures himself as representative for a persistent loss.

The shift from *The Half-Inch Himalayas* to *The Nostalgist's Map of America*, a shift in the connotations of home, records the poet's transition from geographic exile to spiritual exile as he becomes aware that eventually, *everything* will vanish.

While he is more at home in America now, as the collection proceeds he reveals that home is not immune to loss and the world

offers only the mirage of stability. We may read Ali's gesture away from the unrhymed stanzas and syllabics of his first books to the more increasingly complex traditional constructions in *A Nostalgist's Map of America*, *The Country without a Post Office*, and *Rooms Are Never Finished* as a distinct maturation of voice, as well as the poet's greater acknowledgment of the themes of disruption, violence, and death. The tightly weaving forms that Ali increasingly employs are patterns of turn and return, of echo and of interlocking: the ghazal's doubling voices of *qafia* and *radif*; the villanelle and terza rima's rhyme and repetition; the pantoum's reprised, alternating lines; the canzone's five end words in a spectacular arabesque. In such poetry, the intricacies of form interweave to construct an embodiment in midair, creating a temporary region of braided stabilities.

Ali would eventually employ poetic form as harbor, as house, holding evocations of the past in its patterns. The ghazal is a shaped terrain through which such masters as Begum Akhtar and Faiz Ahmed Faiz have traveled. A form recalls legacies: the canzones of "After the August Wedding in Lahore, Pakistan" and "Lenox Hill" revive the tradition of the exiled Dante Alighieri's use of the same form in "Amor, Tu Vedi Ben Che Questa Donna," to say nothing of Dante's invention of terza rima, a form that Ali revives in, among other poems, "A Fate's Brief Memoir," "I Dream I Am the Only Passenger on Flight 423 to Srinagar," and "I Dream I Am at the Ghat of the Only World."

A unifying dynamic in poetry, form merges disparate parts into a historical, objective whole. One task of the poet is to achieve a flexible residence therein, maintaining the richness of individual voice without compromising the structural requirements of the form. Mutually captivated, constantly aware of the geography they traverse, theme partners form as though the two were one anatomy, voice singing within body, establishing and fixing design for the duration of the poem. A tense, vivid, exquisite, and fleeting equilibrium is achieved.

Such equilibrium would prove increasingly necessary in Ali's oeuvre. At the point at which he writes *A Nostalgist's Map of America*, the poet understands that the bonds of love may remove the sting of geographic exile but will prove increasingly helpless in the path of human loss. The title poem and "In Search of Evanescence" are testimonies of the grief of human experience in language at times bejeweled with love. Ali's epigraph to the section is Emily Dickinson's "A Route of Evanescence," a flashy poem that stars a

hummingbird whose speed is so incredible that it might have brought the mail from as far away as Tunis this morning. That the bird metaphorically carries a paper representation of another continent proves compelling for the writer who has titled his first full-length book after a postcard of his missing home and his second after an imaginary map of his current one. Described in vibrant terms of “emerald” and “cochineal,”¹⁶ the hummingbird’s most marked quality is its transience: the colors we admire we must admire quickly, for they disappear as the tiny bird speeds off, and this is the scholarship of evanescence. For Ali the hummingbird is both beauty and loss. Ali and Dickinson’s appreciation of transience is bittersweet—such a bird may stand for the temporary nature of experience itself, illustrating that part of what is lovely about the world is that it vanishes, leaving nostalgia and homesickness, the longing after what is gone.

Apprehension of such transience occurs in “A Nostalgist’s Map of America,” wherein Ali recalls driving with his friend Phil across America. The vehicle of memory is useful for the poem; it evokes evanescence since it conjures existence and diminishment simultaneously. Ali creates a city named Evanescence as they drive through Pennsylvania: “Let’s pretend your city / is Evanescence—there has to be one—.”¹⁷ At once, this seemingly solid moment is revealed as vaporous memory: the present day intrudes through the means of a telephone conversation “six, perhaps seven years since then,” when the companion reveals he is dying.¹⁸ In response to this confrontation with mortality, Ali offers the reader three endings to the poem, each false, thereby echoing the beguiling nature not only of the imaginary city but also of the solidity of poetic invention. While his first two endings do revise the city of Evanescence—“I had to build it, for America / was without one,” and “which I found—though // not in Pennsylvania”¹⁹—the ending he settles upon is an apology to Phil:

. . . Please forgive me, Phil, but I thought
of your pain as a formal feeling, one
useful for the letting go, your transfusions

mere wings to me, the push of numerous
hummingbirds, souvenirs of Evanescence
seen disappearing down a route of veins
in an electric rush of cochineal.²⁰

Ali attempts to inoculate his grief by employing evanescence to decorate the truth of illness into something beautiful, diverting: if Phil's affliction can be revised as the vibrant colors of the hummingbird, it might also adopt the bird's capacity to suddenly disappear in a blur of wings. As he wished to transform the landscape of Pennsylvania so that it might contain an imaginary city, Ali wishes to transform his friend's illness and discomfort. Ali confronts the nature of transience: both the imaginary city and Ali's beautiful words exist in time, and as time passes, both will fail. Ali asks forgiveness not for his actions but for their inefficacies.

"In Search of Evanescence" conjoins the drive across America with the attempt to memorialize Phil. Within this poem, landscape resolves and dissolves in a series of mirages, underlining beauty and then its disappearance, as Ali makes nascent moves toward a larger appreciation of the depths of personal loss. Ali revisits the highways of America; this time he's on Route 80: "I don't know I've begun // mapping America, the city limits / of Evanescence now everywhere."²¹ This evanescent landscape strikes within him an awareness of dematerializing, "such a cadence of dead seas at each turn."²² "The mythic terrain of the book is not the actual historian's terrain," Ali explains in *Himalmag*:

The superstitious mountains of Arizona are not the Karakoram Range or the Hindu Kush mountains but there are so many similarities in mythic structures across the world. . . . This cry to be remembered and the language to be remembered, seen in terms of my friend's death, acquired other dimensions.²³

Such inclusive gestures acknowledge that, in spite of the seeming solidity of territory, geography, or family, the capacity to pass out of existence is shared by all tribes. Ali's poetry acquires dimensions of longing and regret; he grasps a world of perceptible erosions and recognizes that losses are tragic and bittersweet, standing for the absences of things loved, and further, for absences embedded in history and consciousness.

Within "In Search of Evanescence" Ali's rhetoric takes its first steps toward the post-Edenic. Moving between joyous memories and the coming losses, Ali will face the rupture of Phil's illness in terms of the loss of Eden: "there's everything in this world but hope."²⁴ While in future work this fissure will compel Ali toward the stabilities of form, for now it evokes fracture and the attempt

to heal such fracture in response. In section 9 of the poem, the two take a train tour through an imaginary landscape of famous paintings, works of art that will, as the journey proceeds, gradually disappear. Through his reinvention of Emily Dickinson's lines as well as of her anacoluthon, Ali establishes fissures: "After great pain—a formal feeling does come—I— // the society—of that sheer soul. The soul selects."²⁵ Ali conjures Georgia O'Keefe's paintings as a figurative landscape, a place of temporary spiritual beauty through which he and Phil travel (on her "Train—in the Desert— / at Night").²⁶ O'Keefe's paintings of animal skulls and mute deserts are apt in their evocation of "ghost towns," those icons of interruption and interregnum. As the poem nears its end, all the beauty the two have traveled through is revealed as fugitive: "I give our tickets to Fog. // When he leaves, we see Light coming on the plains, / the last painting we own. As it too vanishes."²⁷ The increasingly vaporous piece is grounded in the final stages by couplets, yet as the paintings through which they have been riding vanish entirely, the final couplet holds only Phil's pain, against what is left: the disappearance of beauty.

The final poem of the collection, "Snow on the Desert," merges two significant moments: a drive through fog to Tucson International Airport and a memory of Begum Akhtar singing "during the Bangladesh War."²⁸ The fog of desert and its perceived history mingle in his mind with the moment of Akhtar's voice, "like this turning dark // of fog, a moment when only a lost sea / can be heard, a time // to recollect / every shadow, everything the earth was losing."²⁹ Personal loss enlarges to touch a universal, earthly loss. As the poem ends, the poet merges the disposessions of the earth with his own: "everything the earth / and I had lost."³⁰ In these poems America's topography has dissolved to include Delhi; Calcutta; Kashmir; Santiago, Chile; and elsewhere, so one continent's evanescence may stand for all others, and we behold the antecedent promise of the ideal with the nostalgia of the human for its losses. *A Nostalgist's Map of America* plots a homesickness of a global kind; anyone may navigate with it toward a history of irretrievables.

In *The Country without a Post Office* Ali returns to Kashmir in a series of dream states, finding war-torn desperation: dismembered bodies float down the Jhelum; fires encompass houses; the population diminishes before his eyes. The ostensible subject of the collection, the devastation of Kashmir, becomes a metaphor for the world at large, unmoored from its paradise, where the fates are parentless

and the gods asleep. The poet's use of voices from other troubled landscapes (such as Yeats, Zbigniew Herbert, and Chechnyan Elena Bonner) further enlarges the collection's terrain. His homeland becomes a metaphor for the first lost landscape, his sadness the nostalgia of the expulsion and its subsequent miseries. In a conversation with Eric Gamalinda in *Poets and Writers*, Ali exhibits this imaginative linkage between Kashmir and the troubles elsewhere: "I'm always talking about the troubles of Kashmir. I remember when I was eight or nine my parents talked to me about the execution of the Rosenbergs. That's left quite an impact on me."³¹ The Rosenbergs' link to Kashmir is not direct but exists in terms of the universality of inhumanity. Thus *Kashmir* in his poetry may stand for all places where devastation evokes the felt sense of the flawed human, where paradise exists as possibility, ever present in mind, though the landscape reflects only its absence. The letter writer in "Dear Shahid" writes, "I am writing to you from your far-off country. Far even from us who live here."³² In "After the August Wedding in Lahore, Pakistan," Ali clarifies the link between pre-devastation Kashmir and paradise and their shared sense of impasse, a final time: "banished from Eden (on Earth: Kashmir)."³³

In the face of disorder, a poet may turn to shape. As Ali's apprehension of disorder increases in scope, postcards and maps prove useless, and the poet inevitably seeks other methods of order, grafting subcontinental tragedy onto a number of traditional verse forms; as witness to the devastation of Kashmir, Ali now sings in a variety of tribal structures. More so than in previous collections, *The Country without a Post Office* is sustained by its abundance of forms. Ghazals, quatrains, pantoums, villanelles, sestinas, and terza rimas accumulate, lend the book the grounding required to hold its fluttering, shimmering quality, such as exists in a candle's dying and recuperating light. Kashmir and paradise pass into and out of existence, offering beauty and then its disappearance like Ali's totemic hummingbird.

In a 2003 interview with Anton Shammas for the *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, Theodor Adorno noted the tradition of homesteading implicit in the relationship between the writer and his work: "In his text, the writer sets up house. . . . For a man who no longer has a homeland, writing becomes a place to live."³⁴ The duration of the text is the duration of the haven; the voice will eventually stop singing. Cued to the comfort of the fabricated structure, the reader experiences a syntactic transience: building and building, the poem ends.

As important as its role as temporary haven is form's contribution to the duration of the poem's theme. In "The Country without a Post Office," "nothing remains"³⁵ but letters, the written words of now-lost inhabitants; such messages, Ali contends, in echo of his previous book, are "maps of longings with no limit."³⁶ The borders of longing may be limitless, but the physical borders created by the collapse of the postal system effectively cut off communication. Yet the locus of the nomad is a reckoning of hopelessness underlined with hope: "These words *may* never reach you" (my emphasis).³⁷ Thus Ali embodies pattern to ward off utter hopelessness in his apprehension of ruin, rendering absolute grief over such exile into a fine and tragic beauty.

The poem's eight-line stanzas establish a reflecting rhyme scheme of *abddcb*a that mirrors itself in an interior conversation held forever within its pages, similar to the soliloquy of an undelivered letter that may never reach its "doomed / addresses."³⁸ The poem's mirror form establishes a call and response, the call of "lamps" satisfied by its rhyming mate "stamps."³⁹ Though Ali employs rhyme to ground the desperation in a sense of harmony, he is equally careful to include oblique rhyme so that the poem does not become misleadingly harmonious. "[P]lains" is mated with "flames,"⁴⁰ "wrote" will find "smoke,"⁴¹ and most remarkably, "mirror" will be fulfilled by "letter,"⁴² commenting on the poet's own mastery of form.

Such interrelatedness of form and theme inhabits the book. The sestina of "The Floating Post Office" masterfully intensifies the poem's glimpses of hope appearing in the midst of disorder. Within this title poem of the collection, questions fertilize the landscape with unknowns: "Has he been kept from us?"⁴³ "Who has died? / Who'll live?"⁴⁴ The postman emerges silently, ghostlike; he will disappear again into the "fog of death."⁴⁵ Yet in this landscape of uncertainty, "rumors,"⁴⁶ and "ambushed letters,"⁴⁷ the postman asserts a hope in the weave of the unknown: "he gives his word: / Our letters will be rowed through olive / canals, tense waters no one can close."⁴⁸ A sestina's six end words coalesce in a pattern of sound and meaning, enlarging the theme of the poem by their repetitions, in this case: *live* (which Ali conjugates as *alive* and *olive*), *close* (*disclose*), *road* (*rowed*, *erode*), *word* (*password*), *portents* (*sentence*, *penitent's*, *tense*, *pretense*), and finally, *letters*.⁴⁹ Significantly, this particular end word is never changed: "letters" remains "letters" throughout the poem. Amid the poem's whirlwind, "letters" appears, occasionally but continually. Here, form evokes content: the sestina's braided pattern of

words creates a litany of obsession and relief, as the end words offer occasional glimpses of letters, in John Hollander's terms, a "light" at "stanza's edge"⁵⁰ of the dense forest the form creates, emphasizing the significance of the post office for the exile: letters offer potential evidence of survivors, community, and the possibility of sending out the barest hope to others. Such hope is fleeting, however, and as Ali confronts increasingly dispirited landscapes, his use of poetic forms intensifies. The "Ghazal" that ends section 4 opens with dispossession: "The only language of loss left in the world is Arabic— / These words were said to me in a language not Arabic."⁵¹

In his final collection, *Rooms Are Never Finished*, Ali returns to a devastated Kashmir, traveling with his mother's body to bury her in her homeland as she wished. Foregrounded now is the postparadise wreck of time; his return home leaves him twice rootless, and grieving. In 2001 Ali would learn that he had less than a year to live (he was suffering from the same type of brain tumor that took his mother's life).⁵² In a 2001 article in *Postcolonial Studies*, Amitav Ghosh describes how Ali acknowledged that the poems he was writing would be his last.⁵³

In the canzone "Lenox Hill," a record of his mother's last days, the poet reveals his private grief: "I swear, here and now, not to forgive the universe / that would let me get used to a universe // without you."⁵⁴ In a striking echo of parallel descent, both Kashmir and Lenox Hill become linked landscapes of affliction, as the sirens outside her hospital window remind his mother of the wails of the elephants of Mihiragula as they are driven off the cliffs. Kashmir has become a fading promise, and paradise and the universe are both to be "considered a tomb."⁵⁵ But for Ali the mother is the true home, and in her suffering and her vanishing, all is lost. "For compared to my grief for you, what are those of Kashmir, / and what (I close the ledger) are the griefs of the universe / when I remember you—beyond all accounting—O my mother?"⁵⁶ Nowhere is the poet's desire for home and form more needed; nowhere is the poet more aware of the absolute rupture of experience. The canzone form Ali employs for the poem achieves, as Amitav Ghosh writes, "a soaring superstructure, an immense domed enclosure, like that of the great mosque of Isfahan . . . and the meter is the mosaic that holds the whole in place."⁵⁷

The conceit of "From Amherst to Kashmir" is to examine mourning, which may be the catalyst for both faith and the loss of faith. Against the backdrop of the poem—the lament of the sacri-

fice of Hussain, his family, and his followers—Ali positions the devastating loss of his mother. The history of the Passion magnifies the existence of faith, though Ali will relinquish this at the close of the poem as he relinquishes his mother; it is not possible to judge which sacrifice is greater. Ali records how the death of one's mother severs stabilizing roots such as faith and home. At the close of this poem he admits he is entirely exiled from the world.

The cry of the gazelle, an animal noted for its tenderness and beauty, echoes throughout: the animals weep to foretell Hussain's massacre;⁵⁸ Begum Akhtar's raga evokes "the wound-cry of the gazelle";⁵⁹ Zainab's cry is that of a gazelle, recollected in the cries the *majlis*;⁶⁰ the "wounded gazelle" wail is evoked at the mourning of his mother.⁶¹ The poem is awash in the creature's tragic sound, which stands for the simultaneity of love and loss in the ghazal. Both "amorous" and "melancholic,"⁶² the gazelle's cry is in the contradiction of the two, and it is the sting that lies beneath grief. Yet here, and in "I Dream I Am at the Ghat of the Only World," Ali exiles the gazelle from its ghazal. The animal tries to temporarily shelter here, where Ali employs the Sapphic stanza in several sections to great effect. Coming as it does after three lines of eleven syllables each, the Sapphic stanza's short final line of five syllables implies a cessation, and a succession of Sapphics presents a series of diminishments. John Hollander finds in the form's first three lines "heartbeats," which the fourth line "tenderly end[s]."⁶³

Having taken the titular journey back home and experienced only true loss in the final section of "From Amherst to Kashmir," the poet confronts the question of compound exile: "So what is separation's geography?"⁶⁴ Beginning at the waters of Kashmir, he ponders the river and its history, from its headwaters to its mouth. That all things flow into one another implies cohesion and a design that is to him contradictory. Similarly, though the reflected moon colors the river "steel" and "silver," he finds only "Black Water" and "black waves," which he glosses in his endnotes as *kalapani*: "*Kalapani*, or black water, referred to the stretch of ocean between mainland India and colonial Britain's most notorious prison on the Andaman islands. To cross *kalapani* meant being condemned to permanent exile."⁶⁵ Located securely in his homeland (the landscape of his dreams in his previous books), he concludes the poem not with a cry of homecoming but with a wound cry of the boundless exile, crushed, annihilated:

that *How dare the moon*—I want to cry out,
 Mother—*shine so hauntingly out*
here when I've sentenced it to black waves
inside me? Why has it not perished?
How dare it shine on an earth
*from which you have vanished?*⁶⁶

Edward Said writes, “The exile knows that in a secular and contingent world, homes are always provisional”;⁶⁷ the constant is that one’s deeply felt desire for home will forever be frustrated. A structure that is both ruptured and ongoing would therefore constitute the true estate of the exile, though it seems an impossible feat to manufacture dislocation within infinity. Yet in “Rooms Are Never Finished,” a tribute to writing as an evocation of the irremediable desire for home, Ali creates a form that is both broken and continuous, a flirtation with the infinite. Within this title poem of his final collection, the stanzas (Italian for “rooms”) begin broken and do not end. The last line of each stanza enjambes across white space to the first line of the stanza that follows, which then opens with a prepositional phrase beginning with “in,” creating a constant entrance to follow the continual rupture.

The poem’s epigraph invokes interior designer Mario Buatta: “Many of my favorite things are broken.”⁶⁸ The speaker has welcomed a visitor to his house, and together they admire the rooms while the speaker comments on his interior decorating. “You were / led through each room I was to die // in. But look how each room’s been refurbished[.]”⁶⁹ Indeed, as the two walk from room to room, the reader and Ali move from stanza to stanza, admiring the ornamentation as well as the odd navigable quality of the walls: “in (How one passes through such thick walls!)”⁷⁰

Ali is long familiar with a stanza’s ability to enclose. But in creating stanzas that have both entrance (“in”) and absence of ending (each stanza’s enjambed final line) he has mastered the limitations of the form, creating a Möbius strip of home; a “house,” he writes here, is “a work in progress, / always.”⁷¹ Further, because the poem’s last line—“in. But for small hands. Invisible. Quick . . .”⁷²—ends with an ellipsis, indicating omission and therefore implying continuity, the poem doesn’t actually end at all. Said notes, “Borders and barriers, which enclose us within the safety of familiar territory, can also become prisons, and are often defended beyond reason or necessity. Exiles cross borders, break barriers of thought and experi-

ence.”⁷³ We may consider Ali’s form in this poem an exile’s tour de force, an eradication of the border that ends a poem and hence ends the stabilizing experience.

The book closes with “I Dream I Am at the Ghat of the Only World,” wherein Ali, on a journey, rows toward his mother, and toward his own end. On the way the poet invokes Eqbal Ahmad, Begum Akhtar, James Merrill, all beloved figures who have passed on and whose absences he feels most keenly. If heaven exists, Ali’s excursion would be toward a homecoming that would put an end to wandering, but since the poet tells us this is the “Only World,” we may understand his death as the final banishment. As he rows toward Kashmir, he finds “desecration, God’s tapestry / ripped”⁷⁴ and “[o]nly the wind . . . in one awed / fright of boots, of soldiers.”⁷⁵ Denied his paradise, he perceives his journey as that of perpetual exile: “I’ll always move in my heart between sad countries.”⁷⁶ Ali had fixed his love to Kashmir, extended his love to the world; now he encounters an ultimate loss. He is joined in this banishment by a familiar creature: there is “the cry of the gazelle— / it breaks the heart into the final episode.”⁷⁷ Even the wound cry of Ali’s gazelle, exiled now to the terza rima of this poem, remains here a wanderer in an alien poetic form.

The invention of terza rima is credited to Dante for his *Divina commedia*, another epic journey.⁷⁸ Yet while Dante eventually reaches his paradise, as “I Dream I Am at the Ghat of the Only World” ends, Ali has not yet done so. In this final poem he declares, “*To be rowed forever is the last afterlife*” (emphasis in original).⁷⁹ Said writes, “The pathos of exile is the loss of contact with the solidity and the satisfaction of earth. Homecoming is out of the question.”⁸⁰ Ali allows the poet James Merrill to speak the last line in Merrill’s signature majuscules: “SHAHID, HUSH, THIS IS ME, JAMES. THE LOVED ONE ALWAYS LEAVES.”⁸¹ We understand the “LOVED ONE” is Ali, as he exiles himself out of the poem, leaving readers to experience only the poet’s vanishing.

Notes

1. Michael M. J. Fischer, “Orientalizing America: Beginning and Middle Passages,” *Middle East Report* 178 (1992): 32.

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3. Agha Shahid Ali, *Ravishing DisUnities: Real Ghazals in English* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 2000), 1.
4. Ibid., 3.
5. Christine Benvenuto, "Conversations with Agha Shahid Ali," *Massachusetts Review* 21 (2002): 261–68.
6. Agha Shahid Ali, introduction to *The Rebel's Silhouette: Selected Poems by Faiz Ahmed Faiz*, trans. Agha Shahid Ali (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), x.
7. Ali, *Ravishing DisUnities*, 3.
8. Ibid., 8.
9. Ibid., 9.
10. Qtd. in *ibid.*, 4.
11. Agha Shahid Ali, *The Country without a Post Office* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), 96.
12. Benvenuto, "Conversations with Agha Shahid Ali," 261.
13. Eric Gamalinda, "Poems Are Never Finished," *Poets and Writers* (March/April 2002): 44–51.
14. Bruce King, *Modern Indian Poetry in English* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), 260.
15. Agha Shahid Ali, *The Veiled Suite: The Collected Poems* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2009), 29.
16. Qtd. in *ibid.*, 118.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid., 119.
19. Ibid., 120.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid., 122.
22. Ibid.
23. Qtd. in Rehan Ansari and Rajinder S. Paul, "Agha Shahid Ali; Calligraphy of Coils," *Himalmag* (March 1998): 2.
24. Ali, *Veiled Suite*, 135.
25. Ibid., 131.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid., 132–33.
28. Ali, introduction to *The Rebel's Silhouette*, xxiv.
29. Ali, *Veiled Suite*, 167.
30. Ibid., 168.
31. Gamalinda, "Poems Are Never Finished," 49.
32. Ali, *Veiled Suite*, 194.
33. Ibid., 240.
34. Anton Shammas, "The Lives They Lived: Looking for Someplace to Call Home," *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, December 28, 2003, 25.
35. Ali, *Veiled Suite*, 204.
36. Ibid., 205.
37. Ibid., 206.
38. Ibid., 202.
39. Ibid.
40. Ibid.

41. Ibid., 203.
42. Ibid., 204.
43. Ibid., 207.
44. Ibid.
45. Ibid.
46. Ibid.
47. Ibid.
48. Ibid., 208.
49. Ibid., 207–8.
50. John Hollander, *Rhyme's Reason* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981), 41.
51. Ali, *Veiled Suite*, 225.
52. Amitav Ghosh, "The Ghat of the Only World," *Postcolonial Studies* 5 (2002): 319.
53. Ibid.,
54. Ali, *The Veiled Suite*, 247.
55. Ibid., 248.
56. Ibid., 249.
57. Ghosh, "Ghat of the Only World," 320.
58. Ali, *Veiled Suite*, 250.
59. Ibid., 257.
60. Ibid., 258.
61. Ibid., 275.
62. Ali, *Ravishing DisUnities*, 4.
63. Hollander, *Rhyme's Reason*, 18.
64. Ali, *Veiled Suite*, 276.
65. Ibid., 379.
66. Ibid., 278.
67. Said, *Reflections on Exile*, 185.
68. Ali, *Veiled Suite*, 279.
69. Ibid.
70. Ibid.
71. Ibid., 281.
72. Ibid.
73. Said, *Reflections on Exile*, 185.
74. Ali, *Veiled Suite*, 319.
75. Ibid.
76. Ibid., 318.
77. Ibid., 319.
78. Alex Preminger et al., eds., *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1965), 848.
79. Ali, *Veiled Suite*, 321.
80. Said, *Reflections on Exile*, 179.
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CHRISTOPHER MERRILL

“A Route of Evanescence”

Agha Shahid Ali in America

Shahid liked to white out his birthdate on the title page of his books, determined to hide his age even from his closest friends. And there was something timeless about him. But here are the facts: he was born on February 4, 1949, in New Delhi, and he died in Amherst, Massachusetts, on December 8, 2001, the anniversary of his mother's first seizure from the same form of brain cancer that ultimately took his life. State law prevented his family from following the Muslim custom of burying him within twenty-four hours of his death, on a Sunday, and so he was interred on Emily Dickinson's birthday, just down the road from the house in which the anchorite of Amherst wrote,

If I could bribe them by a Rose
I'd bring them every flower that grows
From Amherst to Cashmere!

These were the lines that Shahid used as an epigraph to his poem “Some Vision of the World Cashmere.” What he gave to his friends and readers was an enduring vision of Kashmir—the land of “doomed addresses” evoked in such haunting terms in his later work. And with one phrase—“A Route of Evanescence”—Emily Dickinson not only inspired Shahid's finest pages in *A Nostalgist's Map of America* but also described his journey through our literary landscape—and through my life. He was my closest friend for nearly twenty years. In a strange coincidence that seems providential, I was born in Amherst and celebrated my fortieth birthday there with a poetry reading at the University of Massachusetts, where Shahid directed the creative writing program until his death.

Our phone bills were outrageous. We spoke almost daily, some days several times, especially when he was working on a new poem. He liked to share his work even before it had begun to take shape.

He would describe its source—in a dream, an image, a phrase, a formal imperative—and then discuss how it might develop. Indeed it was his habit to read me successive drafts of a poem, demanding an authentic response—“Be honest,” he would insist—and help with problematic lines. And he readily incorporated suggestions into the final version. His was a Platonic idea of poetry: it did not matter so much how a line came into being as that it found its way onto the page.

He was alert to the stray bits of language that might be turned into poetry—a throwaway line, a joke, a fragment from another poem, anything. There was a little of the magpie to him. For example, not long after I told him that I planned to use Thomas De Quincy’s sentence—“It was a year of brilliant water”—as an epigraph to a book, he made it the epigraph to his long poem “In Search of Evanescence,” which includes lines from Dickinson and Malcolm Lowry, titles of paintings by Georgia O’Keeffe, and excerpts from her letters. Weaving other voices through his work, in the same way that one jazz musician quotes another, Shahid created his own form of *brilliant water*, a phrase that became a favorite trope. He regularly mined Dickinson’s poetry for lines that might spur new work—we even planned to write a book together titled *The Blond Assassins*, a Dickinsonian phrase that eventually appeared in his ghazal “Forever”—but his literary tastes were universal. Here is a partial list of writers quoted in his last two books: Mandelstam, Yeats, Hopkins, Gibbon, Shakespeare, Eliot, Apollinaire, Trakl, Auden, Faiz, Ghalib, James Merrill, and Mahmoud Darwish. And quoting is a crucial element of Shahid’s final book, *Call Me Ishmael Tonight*, a collection of ghazals in which he pays homage to American poetry by braiding lines from other poets into his own work. This was his gift to American poetry: to use the language so well that it acquired a new light.

He perfected his English watching American television. At the age of twelve he moved with his family to Indiana, where his father took a doctorate, and in the heartland his vision of America took shape, fueled by his parodies of TV commercials. Which is to say: he was conversant with everything that our culture offers, high and low. He knew the dialogue of *Mommy Dearest* by heart. Also *The Lion King*. And poetry, his own and others. He recited his own poems until his final days, even after much of his memory had been destroyed. Milton’s “Lycidas” was the last poem he attempted to memorize, and toward the end he believed, wrongly, that he used to have the whole of *Paradise Lost* by heart. But for Shahid paradise lay

all around him—in poetry, in the spicy meals that he cooked for his friends, on the dance floor, with the people he loved.

For his sixteenth birthday he received from his father a leather-bound notebook, with this inscription: “Another notebook for the same game. Spontaneous self-expression must now turn into studied attempts at conciseness and discipline.” He spent the next thirty-five years obeying that imperative. He earned degrees from universities in Srinagar and New Delhi, at State College, Pennsylvania, and Tucson, Arizona; his academic career took him from Hamilton College to the universities of Massachusetts and Utah; he held visiting professorships and taught at several writers’ conferences. In the classroom he was at once witty and rigorous. In a poorly executed exercise he could spot the seed of a poem; his students were thrilled to watch him turn a work inside out, in the hope of discovering its secret heart. Nor did he tolerate bad writing. He quipped that one line should be put up against a wall and shot—a joke that takes on more weight when you consider the number of people killed in his war-torn homeland; the relationship between poetry and politics was uppermost in his mind. And his playfulness served a larger purpose. Once, when a student asked him to raise his grade, Shahid agreed, on condition that the student sing for him “My Achy-Breaky Heart.” Which he did, in a cracking voice. Shahid gave him a better grade—and a profound lesson in humility.

His readings were, in the memorable words of the American poet William Matthews, a kind of standup tragedy. He would stop in the middle of a poem to pose for a photograph or to castigate someone for leaving the auditorium. More than one person returned to their seat when Shahid asked, “Are you leaving me?” Once, when an overflowing crowd forced some of the audience to sit on the floor by the lectern, he exclaimed, “I love to have white people sitting at my feet!” But what stayed with his listeners was the tension between his casual asides and the seriousness of his work. He was a darkly humorous poet. As he wrote in “An Interview with Red Riding Hood, Now No Longer Little,”

Q. Do you have any regrets?

A. Yes.

I lied when I said it was dark.

Now I drive through the city,

hearing wolves at every turn.

How warm it was inside the wolf! (99)¹

Shahid wanted to publish poems in journals beginning with all the letters of the alphabet; lacking a Z, he tried to convince the editor of *Zyzzyva* that he came from a Pacific Rim nation and thus belonged in his pages; his only reservation about becoming a contributing editor to a new literary journal named *Tin House* was its name—he already had his T. Couldn't they consider a name that began with a Z?

He signed books—his own and others—with lavish inscriptions. One day at lunch in Venice, California, for example, he gave me a book of poems by Xavier Villaurrutia, *Hieroglyphs of Desire*; inspired by the sleek women in bikinis rollerblading by, he wrote on the title page, “We again learn, on the boardwalk, that some hieroglyphs of desire move on wheels.” In a used bookstore in Syracuse, when he discovered a signed copy of his *A Walk Through the Yellow Pages*, which he had given to a married couple, he bought the chapbook and sent it back to them with instructions never to sell it again!

He was my daughter's godfather, a role that he took quite seriously. He bought her gifts from the silver emporium in New Delhi, he asked after her in every phone call, he drove through the snow to Pennsylvania for her christening, even colliding with another car en route. After the Episcopalian service, my wife asked him if, as a Shiite Muslim, he felt uncomfortable assenting to the tenets of Christian faith.

“Not at all,” he replied. “I take it all very metaphorically.”

Which is not to say he had a cavalier attitude about religion. His work is sprinkled with references to the Koran, which in his last years inspired a kind of devotion from him. Indeed his respect for religious ritual, in any denomination, was profound. Poetry was for him a form of prayer and petition to the gods of desire, of love and loss.

I used to think that when my daughter grew up she would realize how fortunate she was to have him as her guardian angel. But she seemed to know that even at the age of six. On the day that he died, before I gave her the news, she decided to cover the walls of my office with her drawings. When I told her that Shahid had died she asked how long it would take for his soul to get to heaven. Faster than a car? she said. A plane? Even faster, I said. Good, she said. Then I can talk to him, like I do with Papa. I was surprised to learn that she was speaking regularly with her late grandfather, and when I asked her what they talked about she replied, “He just asks if I'm happy.”

How happy Shahid was to buy a converted flat in Northampton's former jail. In fact he considered writing a book of poems titled *Jail*. Which goes to the heart of his genius: in his personal life and in his poetry he escaped the bonds of conventional practice and thinking. A triple exile, from Kashmir, from India, and from his mother tongue, Urdu, he refused to play the role of victim; as he wrote in one poem, "for whose world is not in ruins? whose?" A student at Reed College in Portland, Oregon, complained to him that as an Indian he felt alienated from his fellow students, because he was different. Of course you're different, Shahid told him. Celebrate that difference. The poetics he fashioned out of celebrations of difference, the liberation he secured from the shackles of staid thinking, inspired devotion from his friends and readers across the United States.

A crucial element in his poetic development was his friendship with James Merrill. If the publication of *The Half-Inch Himalayas* introduced a new voice into American poetry, combining wit, exotic imagery, and an astute political conscience, under Merrill's sway Shahid grew into a sophisticated formalist. In *A Nostalgist's Map of America*, *The Country without a Post Office*, and *Rooms Are Never Finished*, he wrote in a variety of forms. Syllabics were his favorite pattern, and while he did not really hear stresses in English nevertheless he created a new sound—a jangled music akin to the syllabics of Marianne Moore and Thom Gunn. Sapphics were thus congenial to him; he even translated Faiz and Pushkin into Sapphics. Likewise the three canzones he wrote, a feat that prompted Anthony Hecht to remark that he deserved a place in the *Guinness Book of World Records*. The third one, "The Veiled Suite," was completed even as he learned that he had lost his battle with cancer. Its origins lay in a dream that he had on the eve of his first biopsy, in which he was visited by a figure of death. The last lines: "I'm still alive, alive to learn from your eyes / that I am become your veil and I am all you see" (25).

Kashmir was his poetic lodestar. *The Country without a Post Office*, his most overtly political work, is a meditation on the tragic history of his land, the fate of which is linked to his mother's death in his next book, *Rooms Are Never Finished*, a National Book Award finalist. Before his mother fell ill, Shahid liked to say that he refused to suffer for more than thirty seconds over anything; with her death, however, came a more complex vision of the human condition, which corresponded to the deepening of his engagement with

English and Urdu literary traditions, politics, and religion. In his trio of canzones, "After the August Wedding, Lahore, Pakistan," "Lenox Hill," and "The Veiled Suite," we see his poetry turned into prayers, first for his homeland, then for his mother, and finally for his own soul: "On the farthest side of prophesy, I still need a veil" (24).

The ghazal, Shahid liked to say, is pronounced "ghuzzle." The average American poet's inability to say the word correctly upset him almost as much as the widespread belief that a ghazal could be written without obeying its formal imperatives. So he took it upon himself to properly introduce the form into American literature, writing essays on the history and virtues of the form, delivering lectures, cajoling more than a hundred American poets to write, as he said, "real ghazals in English." The resulting anthology, *Ravishing DisUnities: Real Ghazals in English*, changed American poetry. Shahid's final book, *Call Me Ishmael Tonight*, completed in the last year of his life, is a collection of ghazals in which lines written by American poets are braided together with his own linguistic discoveries, in homage to the poetic tradition of the country to which in the end he pledged allegiance, becoming an American citizen.

It is not often that we can trace profound changes in a nation's poetic landscape, but here we can. Imagine when the Italian sonnet washed up on the shores of English literature: how in the hands of Sir Thomas Wyatt, Edmund Spencer, Philip Sydney, William Shakespeare, John Donne, and many others the form reshaped our literature. It is too soon to say if the ghazal will have a similar effect on American poetry, but if it does literary historians will credit Shahid's pioneering work.

The poet traditionally names himself in the ghazal's *mukta*, or signature couplet. The lines inscribed on Shahid's gravestone come from his most famous ghazal:

They ask me to tell them what *Shahid* means—

Listen: It means "The Belovéd" in Persian, "witness" in Arabic.

(226)

Shahid was the Belovéd of so many people. His witness? A body of poetic work destined to shape the language in a new image of desire.

Contrapuntal and *convergence* are useful words for describing his life and work. His wit was a vital counterpoint to the puritanical thinking that afflicts every realm of American experience; in his work literary and spiritual traditions from around the world con-

verged. He was a true cosmopolitan: that is, someone deeply rooted to a particular place—Kashmir—who was perfectly at home wherever he found himself. He took delight at the number of places where we met, from Santa Fe to San Antonio to Seattle, relishing the strangeness of modern travel. I can hear him even now, waking my family the mornings he stayed with us, singing first a raga and then a song by Dire Straits. What he lacked in musicality—he could barely carry a tune—he made up for in enthusiasm.

In his last months Shahid liked to listen to The Band's version of Bob Dylan's "I Shall Be Released." He would sit by the window in the living room of his brother's house in Amherst, the air swelling with music, his memory ravaged by brain cancer. Only his family knew that he sang to take his mind off his pain, for he was ever the courteous host, asking his visitors—and there was a steady stream—if they had been served lunch or tea. Would they like to hear something different? Did they want to dance? Now it seems to me that the lines that never failed to make him weep—"I see my light come shining / From the West down to the East"—accurately describe the trajectory of his life and poetry, the dazzling arc by which he linked America and his native Kashmir. Shahid was indeed a light like unto none the literary world has ever seen.

His books of poems, *The Half-Inch Himalayas*, *The Nostalgist's Map of America*, *A Walk Through the Yellow Pages*, *The Country Without a Post Office*, *Rooms Are Never Finished*, and *Call Me Ishmael Tonight*, trace his artistic evolution from a witty free verse poet with a complex understanding of political issues to a sophisticated formalist addressing the question of last things. His genius was to fuse the English and Urdu literary traditions: he knew *Paradise Lost* as intimately as the Koran; he was inspired by Dante and Faiz Ahmed Faiz. And he brightened American letters by persuading us to write ghazals—lights shining from the West down to the East. His is the brightest.

It was his enthusiasm for the ghazal that reshaped the American literary landscape. His impatience with free verse ghazals was well known, but I suspect a latent dissatisfaction with his own free translations of Faiz's ghazals may have also convinced him to attempt to honor the form. His mistrust of Western appropriations of the ghazal is a function of a postcolonial sensibility alert to high-handedness in any form; his solution transcended the easy strictures of academic or political debate—that is, counterpoint. As he told April Bernard, explaining his decision to write a poem, on commis-

sion, for a glossy magazine, “I may be for sale but I am not on sale!” And the editors receiving ghazals every week now have Shahid to thank for this convergence of East and West.

What is the ghazal? It dates back to seventh-century Arabia, coincides with the rise of Islam, and appears in many literary traditions, including Farsi, Hebrew, Turkish, Urdu, Pashto, German, and Spanish. (Shahid loved Garcia Lorca’s ghazals). It consists of a series of autonomous couplets, which may be comic, tragic, romantic, political, or religious in subject and tone, all lashed together by rhyme, refrain, and meter. In the opening couplet the rhyme is repeated, establishing the scheme to which the poet, as Shahid liked to say, becomes the slave; in the closing couplet the poet names him- or herself. Urdu’s quantitative meters Shahid translated in his own work into syllabics, partly because he did not register stresses, partly because he was introducing a new sound into English, as we hear in perhaps his most famous ghazal:

The only language of loss left in the world is Arabic— (225)

Shahid was indeed a beloved witness, as the title of the Indian edition of his selected poems makes plain, and my debt to him is enormous. Once he sent his poem “Stationery” to me on a postcard when I was editing a literary journal, and I tried in vain to publish it. My failure to convince my fellow editors of its worth grieved me, for this is a signal poem in his body of work—a plea for convergence, if you will. But I got the last word in the review of Shahid’s *Half-Inch Himalayas* that I published in the same quarterly, concluding with the poem printed in full—the kind of creative action dear to his heart, which, as we shall learn, was very dangerous. Here is the poem:

STATIONERY

The moon did not become the sun.
It just fell on the desert
in great sheets, reams
of silver handmade by you.
The night is your cottage industry now,
the day is your brisk emporium.
The world is full of paper.

Write to me. (71)

Is this not what happened in *Ravishing DisUnities*—note the number of ghazals dedicated to him—and in the ghazal chain conceived for him by Marty Williams, to which more than a hundred poets contributed couplets? This poem, which was published in *Rattapallax*, has no precedent in literary history that I know of, and when you put it together with Shahid’s anthology and his ghazals you can see how profoundly he changed our lives and literature. He was a dangerously wonderful influence, an extraordinary poet blessed with wit on the order of Oscar Wilde, who famously said, when asked if he had anything to declare at Ellis Island, “Only my genius.” Shahid was such a genius.

In his last years he spoke of writing a novel about someone born at the exact moment of the partition, which left Kashmir in the geopolitical netherworld from which it has yet to emerge. The imagined events in the life of his protagonist, who bore an uncanny resemblance to the poet, would have intersected at decisive moments with the history of his homeland; and while we can only imagine what Shahid might have written it is safe to say that his hero would have used his wit—his evanescence—to rise above the conflict. That novel was, of course, his life: a dazzling performance.

The opening couplet in the ghazal chain conceived by Marty Williams as a tribute to Shahid has a curious history. I was in Maui taking care of W. S. Merwin’s house and gardens—a paradise of palms and mangoes and banana trees, which Shahid and I referred to as the Promised Land. One day, brewing a cup of tea (we were settling in for a long phone conversation), I said there was no sugar in the Promised Land, only honey. Shahid immediately recognized the poetic potential of my joke, and since he was writing ghazals at the time we began to play around with a refrain to close the couplet. “Swear by the olive in the God-kissed land” was not a perfect rhyme, which pleased him all the more. (In his poem “I See Chile in My Rearview Mirror” he took pleasure in rhyming “Utah” with “blue tar,” a rhyme that gained force from his accent.) Shahid insisted that we each write a ghazal beginning with this couplet, but I did not get around to it while he was alive—to my endless regret. In his poem “Land” he reverses the rhyme and refrain, as if to reinforce the idea that nothing is perfect, even in the Promised Land. For he was ever the realist. I leaped at the chance to start the ghazal chain, joining poets near and far in paying homage to our dying friend, who supplied the *mukta*: “At the moment the heart turns terrorist, / are Shahid’s arms broken, O Promised Land?” (348).

To this day I still reach for the phone to call him, to tell him a joke or a story, to hear his voice; the pain of his absence is still acute. The ghazal that I wrote for him long after he was gone also ends with a question: "Will this Christ-bearer find his only friend / In the Promised Land—in blessed Shahid's land?" The answer lies in his poems.

LAND

Swear by the olive in the God-kissed land—
There is no sugar in the promised land.

Why must the bars turn now when, Love,
I'm already drunk in your capitalist land?

If home is found on both sides of the globe,
home is of course here—and always a missed land.

The hour's come to redeem the pledge (not wholly?)
in Fate's "Long years ago we made a tryst" land.

Clearly, these men were here only to destroy,
a mosque now the dust of a prejudiced land.

Will the Doomsayers die, bitten with envy,
when springtime returns to our dismissed land?

The prisons fill with the cries of children.
Then how do you subsist, how do you persist, Land?

"Is my love nothing for I've borne no children?"
I'm with you, Sappho, in that anarchist land.

A hurricane is born when the wings flutter . . .
Where will the butterfly, on my wrist, land?

You made me wait for one who wasn't even there
though summer had finished in that tourist land.

Do the blind hold temples close to their eyes
when we steal their gods for our atheist land?

Abandoned bride, Night throws down her jewels
so Rome—on our descent—is an amethyst land.

At the moment the heart turns terrorist,
are Shahid's arms broken, O Promised Land? (347–348)

Notes

1. All quotations of Ali's poems are from Agha Shahid Ali, *The Veiled Suite: The Collected Poems* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2009).

JASON SCHNEIDERMAN

The Loved One Always Leaves

*The Poetic Friendship of Agha Shahid Ali
and James Merrill*

Saying that James Merrill and Agha Shahid Ali were friends is a bit like saying that Robert Lowell and Sylvia Plath were friends—it fails to do justice to the intensity of the relationship, and it fails to capture the enormous influence of the senior partner on the junior partner. Ali's first book, *The Half-Inch Himalayas*, appeared in the same year that the two met. The collection is marked by free verse and a light touch. The book's epigraph is from Virginia Woolf: ". . . for wherever I seat / myself, I die in exile." Ali opened his literary career with Woolf's idea of symbolic death. Fifteen years later, facing his own literal death from brain cancer, Ali closed his penultimate book of poems by letting Merrill guide him into the afterlife. Virginia Woolf and T. S. Eliot were Ali's high modernist precursors—the touchstones he turned to as a scholar and young writer. Merrill was his real-life mentor, a flesh-and-blood friend, and a powerful influence whose example both led Ali toward the increasing formalism that opened out onto his embrace of the ghazal and served as his guide into death.

Agha Shahid Ali and James Merrill met at a dinner party in Arizona, where Shahid had asked to prepare a meal to meet the visiting poet. Ali was almost instantly beloved by everyone who met him, and Merrill was no different. That single dinner party in Arizona led to an affectionate and loving correspondence, in which they quickly adopted the roles of *erastes* and *eromenos*. Ali's turn toward formal poetics after meeting Merrill attracts frequent comment. Amitav Ghosh recalled that after befriending Merrill, Ali "began to experiment with strict metrical patterns and verse forms such as canzone and sestina."¹ Critics have associated Ali's Merrill-inspired turn toward form with his maturation.² By the end of the 1990s Ali had become strongly identified with formal poetry and the formal ghazal in particular.

Alison Lurie's account of Merrill's life suggests that Merrill's final years were marked by dissolution: his relationship with Peter Hooten had eclipsed his partnership with David Jackson, and Jackson was taking increasing risks in his own sexual escapades. However, Merrill's poems and the smattering of his letters that I have seen suggest that Merrill had found something more like a molecular structure of sex and affection that linked his various relationships into a web of care, rather than a nexus of betrayal and recrimination.

While it is clear that Merrill's influence on Ali was profound, there are a number of red herrings. Shahid's 1987 chapbook *A Walk through the Yellow Pages* would seem to pay obvious homage to Merrill's 1974 book *The Yellow Pages*, but there is no relation in form or content that I can discern. Both collections are heavy with allusion, though Ali writes about fairy tales while Merrill's references are mythological and historical. Considering that the two only met in 1987, Ali's choice of title also seems an aspirational association with Merrill if anything at all.

More interesting than picking about in Ali's work for the influence of James Merrill—which will be much easier after Merrill's correspondence is published—is considering how their careers as poets both turned on unlikely obsessions that came to dominate their poetry and their reputations. One can hardly think of Merrill without the Ouija board at which he and David Jackson entertained their “visitors.” The communications via Ouija formed the heart of *The Changing Light at Sandover*, which earned Merrill a Pulitzer, a National Book Award, and the National Book Critics Circle Award (although the awards accumulated as the poem was published in its component parts). This long poem remains a landmark of American literature, though it is somewhat aloof from Merrill's other work.

Ali's rehabilitation of the ghazal in English restored the formal constraints to the English-language reader while also insisting on a historical dignity for the form that it had been denied in the West. In the introduction to his anthology of ghazals, *Ravishing DisUnities: Real Ghazals in English*, Ali rejects Paul Oppenheimer's claim that the sonnet is the oldest poetic form still in use, pointing out that the ghazal originated in the eleventh century.³ While the formal constraints of the ghazal have been known to English-language readers and writers since at least the 1930s, and the ghazal seemed dormant in the 1940s and 1950s, the free verse translations of Ghalib by Adrienne Rich in the 1960s created the perception that ghazals were

simply free verse poems in which unrelated couplets were unified by no more than mood or tone. Ali restored the formal constraints of the ghazal, offering English-language writers a form that could avoid the unities of narrative or argument and allow a multifaceted approach to a single subject, like exile or rain. A posthumous collection of Ali's ghazals, *Call Me Ishmael Tonight*, appeared in 2003. Twelve years later it is almost impossible to discuss the ghazal in English without acknowledging Ali's codification and popularization of the form in English.

In finding these new modes—Merrill at his Ouija board and Ali at the ghazal—they intensified the power of their work. As I've written elsewhere, one way to see the trajectory of Merrill's *Sandover* is toward an aesthetics of transcription—a paradoxical refusal of the sort of formal shaping that poetry demands, as the voices are increasingly *received* through the Ouija board. Of course, the voices collapse in on themselves, reincarnation allowing each speaker to reveal himself as an incarnation of another speaker. Merrill's work after *Sandover* feels more relaxed and casual. By Merrill's last collection, *A Scattering of Salts*, the poems are still formal, but they somehow feel less self-conscious. Just as Merrill switched from glasses to contacts in order to remove a barrier between himself and the world, so the later poems feel like conversations rather than revelations.

In speaking of his attachment to Ali's work, Amitav Ghosh wrote, "His voice was like none I had heard before. . . . His was a voice that was not ashamed to speak in a bardic register. I could think of no one else who would even conceive of publishing a line like, 'Mad heart, be brave.'"⁴ This mode of bardic intensity was facilitated by the ghazal, because those moments no longer had to be embedded in stories or linear meditations. The last ghazal of Ali's last book, *Call Me Ishmael Tonight*, is one couplet, declaiming in precisely the voice that attracted Ghosh, "If you leave who will prove that my cry existed? / Tell me what was I like before I existed."⁵

Though twenty-three years his junior, Ali survived Merrill by only six years. Still, in perhaps the most interesting act of devotion and influence, Ali inhabited Merrill's technique of ventriloquism when he himself faced the void. Just as Merrill had channeled his mentors and guides (particularly W. H. Auden) through the Ouija board, now Ali summoned Merrill in his poetry. Ali's penultimate collection, *Rooms Are Never Finished*, narrates his journey to Kashmir with his family in order to bury his beloved mother. In the final

poem of the book, “I Dream I Am at the Ghat of the Only World,” Ali blends multiple mythologies and cultures as he boards a dream-like boat and attempts to make peace with his loss. Merrill’s voice appears in all capital letters, the same technique used to indicate communication through the Ouija board in *Sandover*. Merrill guides Shahid in coping with both his mother’s and his own mortality.

It is no mistake that Ali chose Merrill to guide him into the next world. As a scholar of T. S. Eliot, Ali must have been familiar with this passage from “Tradition and the Individual Talent”: “No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead.”⁶ Merrill had secured his place in the tradition by relating himself to his immediate predecessors in *Sandover*. At the end of his life, Ali makes the same move, anchoring himself to the tradition but also insisting on securing Merrill’s place there. Merrill becomes his Virgil, and Ali makes himself his own Dante.

At the end of a book about a journey to bury his mother, one might expect Merrill to arrive with words about where Ali’s mother was about to be reincarnated—reincarnation being the primary obsession of *Sandover*. However, Merrill’s voice arrives with no comfort based in the afterlife: “SHAHID, HUSH. THIS IS ME, JAMES. THE LOVED ONE ALWAYS LEAVES.”⁷ Merrill delivers comfort in the form of the universality of suffering. Shahid should quiet his tears not because his loss serves a celestial plan or because his mother will soon be returned to the earth but because loss is the foundational condition of life. Indeed, Merrill is perhaps *less* lost in that his voice can come to comfort Ali, while Ali’s mother remains unreachable in the afterlife. But the truth Merrill offers to Ali is simply that we must all bear loss, no matter whom we love.

Notes

1. Ghosh, “Ghat of the Only World,” 313–14.
2. Newman, “Separation’s Geography.”
3. Ali, *Ravishing DisUnities*, 1.
4. Ghosh, “Ghat of the Only World,” 31.
5. Ali, *Veiled Suite*, 376.

6. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," 101.

7. Ali, *Veiled Suite*, 321.

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Agha Shahid Ali, World Literature, and the Representation of Kashmir

It now seems clear that Agha Shahid Ali will be remembered among American poets for his personal charisma, for the variety within his books, and most of all for explaining, making popular, and writing exemplary versions of the Arabic-Persian-Urdu-descended form called the ghazal, or as Ali would have it, the “real ghazal.” (I’ll refer to him formally here, by his last name, though it’s worth noting how often readers continue to refer to him as “Shahid.”) Ali’s 2000 anthology, *Ravishing DisUnities: Real Ghazals in English*, and his own 2003 collection of ghazals, *Call Me Ishmael Tonight* (which incorporated ghazals from earlier collections), have had unmistakable influence.¹ Rarely in the history of English has a single poet been so quickly and indissolubly identified with a poetic form.

For much of his writing life in America, though, Ali seemed destined to be remembered primarily for something else: he was the poet, perhaps the only poet, who brought into American English the modern history of Kashmir. Born in New Delhi two years after Partition to a mother from “the plains of Lucknow,” Ali grew up in Srinagar, Kashmir’s famously idyllic summer capital, known for its “four, clear seasons,” its mountainous backdrop, its woven shawls, and its houseboats.² Centuries of South Asian and European traditions portray the Vale of Kashmir, which surrounds Srinagar, as an idyll, a paradise, a “Happy Valley,” in the words of the historian Chitrlekha Zutshi, and a place “without religious discord.”³ “Before the violence,” agrees Claire Chambers, “Kashmir was frequently represented almost as an earthly heaven.”⁴

Ali did undergraduate work at the University of Srinagar before moving back to New Delhi and thence in 1975 to the United States. Ali’s later poems record trips back and forth, for weddings and funerals among other reasons, and they look at his life as a traveler, or as an exile, or as a resident of more than one culture; they also look specifically at the decades of controversy that broke out

into street fighting, terrorism, martial law, and widespread destruction within and around Srinagar beginning in late 1989.

The more we know about that controversy, the more we can see what Ali did in his poems. *Kashmir* can refer either to the Muslim-majority vale or to the larger modern territory between India and Pakistan that includes the Vale of Kashmir; Hindu-majority Jammu, to the south; sparsely populated mountains and the strategically important Siachen glacier, to the north; and the majority-Buddhist Ladakh region, on the border with China, to the northeast. "Pre-colonial Kashmir," writes Zutshi, often depicted itself "as a homeland that had to be saved from destruction by outsiders" and as a place with a distinctive "ethos of tolerance."⁵ From the late nineteenth century until partition in 1947 Jammu and Kashmir made up one of the princely states, with its own British-supported hereditary ruler from the Jammu-based Hindu Dogra dynasty. After partition, the last Dogra ruler tried and failed to keep his state independent; it faced military attacks from rebels who wanted Kashmir to join Pakistan, and the Indian state would provide military assistance only if Kashmir agreed to a de facto union with India instead.

The result, which obtains to this day, was a province of Jammu and Kashmir under Indian control; a smaller state of Azad ("free") Kashmir, controlled by Pakistan; and a militarized border, the Line of Control. Some Muslim Kashmiris present themselves first and foremost as Muslim, and some Pandits (the region's Hindus) identify themselves in religious terms first, but the territory also has a historical culture of Kashmiriyat, or Kashmiri-ness, inseparable from religious pluralism and sometimes linked to political independence. (One important proponent of Kashmiriyat was Sheikh Abdullah, a secularist, leftist leader of Muslim heritage who clashed with the last of the Dogras and was imprisoned for much of the 1950s and 1960s but served as prime minister during the 1970s; he died in 1982, and his son Farooq, who succeeded him, did not command the same respect.) Srinagar and the Vale of Kashmir remained a tourist destination during the 1980s, though sniper and bomb attacks in Srinagar had begun: 1989, "effectively . . . the valley's last tourist season" in the twentieth century, brought about eighty thousand international visitors, hiking the mountains or enjoying a holiday on a houseboat in Dal Lake.⁶

Later that year Srinagar became a war zone. Muslim or independence-minded groups, some coming over the border from Pakistan, mounted attacks on the Srinagar government; India in

1990 declared—and enforced, with some brutality—martial law. The vale became a source of refugees: “The losers in the insurgency . . . are the Kashmiris,” concluded the journalist Victoria Schofield. During her visit in 1993, Schofield recalled, “the city of Srinagar was dusty and dirty, with uncollected rubbish dumped on the roadside. . . . The charred remains of once revered buildings, such as the library next to the mosque at Hazratbal, were a visual reminder of past battles. Dal Lake was thick and stagnant with weeds.” Even after years of relative calm, in 1999 the *Economist* reported that Srinagar “still looks like a city dumped inside a maximum-security prison, with guns poking through piles of sandbags on nearly every corner.”⁷

Ali's 1997 collection *The Country without a Post Office* depicts the years of terror, disinvestment, and destruction in Kashmir, even while it continues to view the longer, and sunnier, history of the place. The book goes out of its way both to present Ali's Kashmir to non-Kashmiris and to present it as more than the war zone it became. Ali situates the Kashmir that he knew not just on a map but within a literary and artistic culture that extends beyond South Asia, beyond and outside any national tradition. His allusions, his proper nouns, and his choice of forms all help him present the territory, and the city, where he grew up not just as a tragedy but as an attraction for English-speaking readers, most of whom will never go there. These same features in Ali's poetry also let him reflect on his damaged home and on the family that brought him up in Kashmir. They depict a poet with a sense of himself—confident, multicultural, attuned to beauty, comfortable in several languages—that matches the former self-image of Srinagar.

These poems of Kashmiriyat thus run in parallel to, and lay the groundwork for, the poet of that importantly international form the “real ghazal,” whom Ali finally became. Ali's sense of himself in *The Country* thus becomes, if not a source of hope, at least a counter to disenchantment: something of Kashmir's optimistic, multicultural beauty survives, if not in the land of today, then in the poet who writes about what it has been. Against journalists—or poets—whose chosen genres isolate Kashmir, and other present-day war zones, as places set apart by exceptional strife, Ali allows his own Kashmir to survive in a larger verbal and cultural matrix, one that includes both a global literary heritage and the specific attractions of its own past.

That survival turns up very early in *The Veiled Suite*, Ali's posthu-

mously assembled collected poems: in fact, we find it in a pun on the very first page, in the late ballade (the Provençal form with repeated end words) that gives the collection its title. In “The Veiled Suite” the poet meets a mysterious stranger (“No mortal has or will ever lift my veil,” he says) who may be love or death or both at once. The stranger has traveled the world—“He’s brought the sky from Vail, / Colorado, and the Ganges from Varanasi” (the repeated end word here is *sea*). But he has also come from a “vale / of tears” and “When I meet his gaze, there is again the veil” (*VS* 23–24). “The Veiled Suite” describes an erotic assignation, but it is also a deathbed poem, alluding to those earlier erotic deathbed poems, James Merrill’s “Press Release” and John Keats’s “This living hand.” Ali presents both his personages—lover and beloved, dying man and spiritual emissary—as elusive world travelers. Wherever he goes, into ecstasies or on his deathbed, Ali remains “behind the veil,” meaning mysterious, and also flirtatious, and also perhaps disguised and distorted by Orientalism, as well as connected to the Vale of Kashmir.

Those connections resound through the succeeding pages, even those written before 1989, and of course in *The Country without a Post Office* we meet them thick and fast. Written in America, it is a book of remembered returns to Kashmir, and in it Ali sees, or imagines that he can see, the houses, streets, communities, holiday habits, and collective ethos only recently lost, along with individuals (some known to him personally) who have died in the conflict. The collection looks back into Kashmiri history as well as around at the disastrous present: the former, with its insistence on beauty and good fortune, keeps on rebuking and shaming the latter, as in “A History of Paisley,” where “men / fleeing from soldiers into dead-end lanes” leave “footprints on the street” whose shapes ironically resemble a beautiful carpet (*VS* 218).

Yet *The Country without a Post Office* refuses to confine itself to Kashmir, or even to the South Asian, Himalayan, Muslim and Hindu legacies in and around the vale. That refusal of confinement, that work against isolation, comes out in the poems’ sometimes Merrillesque, sometimes rueful attempts at maintaining high spirits, their attempts to be something more than witness, more than lament. It comes out, too, in their way of introducing so many facts and places about the conflict without becoming flat narrative; in their formal variety, especially when they use strict forms; and, most evidently, in their global and polyglot literary allusion.

The Country without a Post Office aligns Kashmir with other war-

torn places: “The City of Daughters,” composed in strictly rhymed heroic quatrains, tries to “say farewell to the city / (O Sarajevo! O Srinagar!), // the Alexandria that is forever leaving,” likening all these cities to the earlier places erased by Noah’s Flood (*VS* 230). “A Villanelle” juxtaposes Srinagar’s “ruins” with those of Chechnya and “Armenia” (*VS* 238). Parts of *Country* seem almost too obtrusively conscious of their likeness to other books of poetry about civil wars and intrastate conflicts in other parts of the world, such as Seamus Heaney’s *North* or Ciaran Carson’s *The Irish for No*.

Yet even more insistently, and perhaps more effectively, than it connects Kashmir to other war zones, the book places Kashmir in a global *literary* network, extending east, west, north, and south in space, beyond the Hindu and Muslim parts of the globe, as well as backwards in time (to, for example, the line of heroic quatrains, like those in Dryden and Gray). “I See Kashmir from New Delhi” lets Ali encounter a deceased Kashmiri friend, Rizwan, who comes close to quoting Wallace Stevens’s “The Snow Man”: “I have been cold a long, long time,” Rizwan’s ghost says. Even the color coding is international, as well as antisectarian. “I See Kashmir” bears an epigraph from W. B. Yeats, the famous lines from “Easter 1916” about “wherever green is worn.” Green is the color of Islam, partisan in a Kashmiri context, and also the color of the “green thread at Shah Hamdan, to be / untied only when the atrocities / are stunned by your jeweled return” (*VS* 178–80). The following poem, “The Last Saffron,” begins with the color of Hindu ritual, also a spice cultivated in Kashmir.

“The Last Saffron” in turn begins not with Hindu or Indian allusion but with riffs on the Chilean modernist César Vallejo’s often translated sonnet “Piedra negra sobre piedra blanca” (Black stone on a white stone). Where Vallejo wrote “Moriré en Paris” (“I will die, in Paris, on a rainy day”), Ali begins, “I will die in autumn, in Kashmir . . . I will die that day in late October, it will be long ago” (*VS* 181–82). Ali’s poem “A Fate’s Brief Memoir” owes much in tone and rhetoric to Merrill, but it owes its terza rima to Dante. It incorporates lines from T. S. Eliot, Auden, and *King Lear*, and it takes up (while its rhyme scheme stands for) the ways in which the “threads” of our own destinies can become entangled, or run in parallel, wherever we live: “in the stars’ light each of us lonely / with threads—trillions.” Ali then asks fate (or a personified fate, one among many), “*Do you also spin the threads of nations?*” (*VS* 211–12). Ali’s “A Pastoral” envisions a return to ancestral houses very much

in the mode, and sometimes in the words, of T. S. Eliot's "Burnt Norton": "Quick, the bird will say. And we'll try / the keys . . . and inherit (Quick, the bird / will say) that to which we belong" (*VS* 197–98).

Such lines themselves promise evidence of "belonging," since "that to which we belong," that in which Ali and his own vision of Kashmir belong, is not only the local, and the beautiful, and the ancestral, but the international and the self-consciously literary. No nation's thread hangs on its own, and nothing can be woven with only one of them. The very next piece in *The Country* after "A Pastoral" envisions, in clear but fragmentary prose, Ali's own return to his family home, which he imagines that the Indian soldiers and the anti-Indian militants have spared: coming back after "two summers," "I eavesdrop on Operation Tiger: Troops will burn down the garden and let the haven remain. / This is home—the haven a cage surrounded by ash—the fate of Paradise" (*VS* 200). The prose continues: "On my shelf, by Ritsos and Rilke and Cavafy and Lorca and Iqbal and Amichai and Paz, my parents are beautiful in their wedding brocades, so startlingly young!" (*VS* 201). These poets belong in Ali's Kashmir, among the beauties of its mountains, as the fundamentalist radio he overhears must not.

Ali here writes what Wai Chee Dimock calls a literature of "hemispheric Islam" (by which she means both the Northern and the Western Hemispheres), connecting American writing directly to near Eastern and South Asian texts but also connecting those texts and their locales to the European continent and to Latin America. To write this kind of transnational literature with any degree of aesthetic success is to expand our sense of what we ought to seek and what we need to know when we read American, or "Islamic," or South Asian literature—and to make us less parochial thereby; it is to get from a country without a post office to Amherst, or New York City, not by telling a binary story of exile but by creating (to quote Dimock) a "map . . . broader and richer than the one currently in use," where "violence is reproductive rather than terminal, itinerant rather than" confined to one trouble spot.⁸ Dimock—who does not mention Ali—used those phrases to praise a much earlier American writer, Washington Irving, as he considered the sudden destruction of another multicultural society, the Iberian Moors.

The Country without A Post Office is an anguished book, and an informative book, and a retrospective book—Ali looks back at cut

or burnt threads that connect him to pre-1989 Kashmir—but as much as it is any of those other things it is a book supersaturated with quotation, echo, and allusion, the kind of allusion that pays homage to (rather than satirizing or replacing) its sources. A case could be made that *The Country*, so rich in repeated words and in pointers to prior texts, addresses what John Hollander called the “whole prior tradition of the poetic treatment of echo.”⁹

Taken together, those allusions, quotations, and echoes decry—and attempt to counter—Kashmir’s latter-day isolation. When Americans (and Singaporeans and New Zealanders and so on) without family in the territory read prose about Kashmir, we read about it in the limited context of India against Pakistan, or else we encounter it as an isolate place, as a heaven on earth whose remoteness (as well as its beauty) has now been despoiled. But Kashmir’s beauty did not depend, in Ali’s accounts, on its isolation. Kashmir is for Ali not just a beautiful place with troubled people, not just a site of dispute between India and Pakistan, but a place now fastened by its ethos, its suitability for literary modes, to Israel and Palestine, to Russia in the 1920s and early 1930s, to the Ireland of Yeats’s civil war poems, and to the Spanish Civil War. This paradise is not paradise because it is remote but because its beauties and traditions of architecture, of craft, of language connect it to other visions of paradise from other literary traditions, and hence to other traditions of a Fall.

Indeed, isolation is part of Kashmir’s new problem. Every time the book laments a corpse (Rizwan’s, for example) it also laments the enforced isolation that befalls places engulfed by civil war, isolation both physical (it’s hard to go there) and cognitive (once there, it’s hard to think about anything other than the war). That is what Ali’s title “The Country without a Post Office” means: the poems Ali sends to Kashmir, as well as the messages that he imagines receiving and (as in the prose poem “Dear Shahid”) the messages that he has really received, lament the difficulty of sustaining connections between present-day Kashmir and anywhere else. “Here one can’t even manage postage stamps” (VS 194). Apparently postal delivery did stop during the conflict, making the title literally true, though it also refers to Kashmir’s lack of national institutions, such as its own postage. The publishable poetry becomes a substitute for letters that cannot get through, a figurative means of communication between Kashmir and the rest of the reading world when the literal means have broken down. If the poems succeed aesthetically they will give that figurative means a style as distinctively Kashmiri

as the literal postal system used on Dal Lake, "The Floating Post Office" that called at each houseboat (*VS* 207).

Ali's Kashmir insists on connecting forms, allusions, and cultures distant in time and space: Merrill to Provençal, Yeats to Begum Akhtar. That spirit diverges from—it might even react, quietly, against—another transnational category much discussed among American poets while Ali was writing *The Country*: "poetry of witness," popularized by Carolyn Forché in her anthology *Against Forgetting*. Poetry of witness, in Forché's formulation, serves to report on atrocity, bearing responsibility for its memory or trying to alert the rest of the world. The category, by Forché's accounting, includes poetry about the Troubles in Northern Ireland, Forché's own writings about El Salvador, Quincy Troupe's and other poetry of Black Power, Faiz Ahmed Faiz's poetry of prison and exile, and works by survivors of the Holocaust; it became (to some extent against Forché's own wishes) almost a recognized genre of its own, for which (as she wrote) "extremity . . . demands new forms or alters older modes of poetic thought."¹⁰ In this model, which can emphasize either unadorned reportage or modernist innovation, Faiz, Paul Celan, Nelly Sachs, and Anna Akhmatova are connected to one another perhaps more closely than any of them is connected to any national, or linguistic, or premodern lyric tradition.

It is a model that Ali's transnational poetry about Kashmir rejects. His Kashmir is connected not only to other trouble spots but to larger webs of form, allusion, and tradition, webs that do not, of course, exclude popular culture and that make little distinction (as Merrill made little distinction) between modernism as such and all that came before. Ali also goes out of his way to differentiate his poetry from journalism, from unadorned or moralized war reportage. He does not try to suggest that Vallejo, Dante, and Yeats are all part of one imperiled great tradition, nor that they all approach the world one way and in that respect they differ from some familiar readings of T. S. Eliot (on whom Ali wrote a thesis). Instead, Ali's allusions to places, wars, and prior works of art join a network always incomplete, always under construction and in need of reestablishment, a network established by allusion and quotation as well by his variety of accomplished forms: quatrains, prose poems, free verse, terza rima, a villanelle, a ballade, and Ali's first work (not counting translations from Faiz, into unrhymed English) in the form of the (real) ghazal.

The Country without a Post Office thus looks in retrospect like a

starting point for Ali's most influential—and most obviously transnational—project: the English-language “real ghazal.” Zutshi, the historian of Kashmir, has tried to dismantle what she calls an accumulation of single-voice “nationalist narratives,” including a single story about tolerant, multicultural Kashmiriyat. And Zutshi concludes that the true, complicated “nexus of memory, history, narration and conflict” in the vale might be best portrayed in Ali's poems: she ends her book with his poem “Farewell.”¹¹ That poem—not a ghazal, though it has ghazal-like aspects—serves in *The Country without a Post Office* as the first lineated work in the book and the first to use structural repetitions, devices in which a word or phrase comes back, the same and not the same. Some of its words and phrases are quotations from European authors such as Tacitus: “They make a desolation and call it peace.” Others amount to changes rung on key words:

Your history gets in the way of my memory.

I am everything you lost. You can't forgive me.

I am everything you lost. Your perfect enemy.

Your memory gets in the way of my memory. (VS 176)

These sentences remind suitably informed readers that Kashmir has multiple narratives, each one going against the grain of some others, and that these narratives come not just from sects or traditions but from individuals (“you” and “I,” not “we”). Ali's note to the poem says that it can be read, but need not be read, as a poem of failed love between a Muslim and a Pandit. Notice also the device that Ali's later ghazals would use so well: rhyme or near rhyme that disregards stress accent, as in “forgive me” with “enemy,” which gives the effect of fluent South Asian spoken English to an American ear.

“Farewell” has a nonce form, apparently invented by Ali; he also chose established and rigorous forms. *The Country* concludes with a ballade about a wedding in Lahore, whose end words include *pain* (*windowpane, campaign*) and *Kashmir. Rooms Are Never Finished* (2001), Ali's next book, begins with a ballade, where one of the end words is, again, *Kashmir* (VS 249). Forms where the same words came back again and again had a special attraction for Ali, and a special application to the conflict in his land, providing a kind of formal distance, a way to “return” to words as to sites, though their earlier meanings

had shifted or fallen away. Ghazals, with their *radif* and *qasida*, are only the most distinctive among such forms.

Ali's project of connecting Kashmir to a larger literary history, and to other global trouble spots, also continues in *Rooms*: one ghazal in *Rooms* takes the *radif* "exiles": "By the Hudson lies Kashmir, brought from Palestine / It shawls the piano, Bach beguiled by exiles" (*VS* 297). The trials of refugees, and of more fortunate exiles, in the same poem include not just modern Palestinians en bloc but also ancient Israelites, eating unleavened bread on the way out of Egypt; Oscar Wilde; and the particular Palestinian to whom the poem gets dedicated, Edward Said, whose "cross-national, cross-cultural, cross-hemispheric vision" (in Jahan Ramazani's words) both Ali's form and Ali's explicit content endorse. Here, Ramazani writes, "the exilic destinies of a poet and critic from two embattled, non-self-governing homelands are made to rhyme," not just with each other but with other places and moments too.¹² Again, the lines take Kashmir out of an exclusively South Asian, Muslim, or Hindu discourse and set it before the world. No wonder Ali told an interviewer that he liked "discovering obscure references to his native land," that is, to Kashmir, "in Western authors' work."¹³

Ali's late books generally, and *The Country without a Post Office* most of all, thus ask us to read them not only as transnational—"informed and constituted by social, political, and even linguistic trends that are not limited to a single nation or region," in John Pizer's definition—but as something like what Goethe called "World literature," *Weltliteratur*.¹⁴ *Weltliteratur* for Pizer (as for Homi Bhabha) means not or not simply a collection of masterworks, nor a global monoculture produced in emulation of those masterworks, but a network of estimable creations that speak to one another across national, continental, and linguistic bounds and that can do ethical as well as critical work because of the manner in which they cross those bounds.

These creations can show—as Pizer explains—that if we are to imagine literature as transnational (as having some independence from national cultures) we must also imagine it as "subnational": work that aspires to *Weltliteratur* may well epitomize, or depend on, towns, regions, cities, or other locales that do not fit well into any existing nation-state.¹⁵ Kashmir, obviously, is one such locale. ("Germany" itself was very far from being one nation-state when Goethe introduced *Weltliteratur* as a term.) Ali's range of forms, his proper nouns, and his allusions, connecting places and languages to

one another, also do in practice what Pizer says that Goethe's concept of *Weltliteratur* does in theory: it "allows creative writers themselves a way to counteract the confusions that this transnationalism and a concomitant loss of discrete national-cultural identity bring in their train."¹⁶

That counter-action also amounts to an imaginative defense of Kashmir. *The Country without a Post Office* works very hard to show facets of destroyed or embattled Kashmir without claiming that it can show a whole: it shows those facets, those pieces, inscribed with literary history, with Ali's personal history, and with a bevy of personal names. It has a subject, as its author has a heritage, but it pursues both as literally multicultural and religiously pluralist while noting an Islamic background. It constructs international, intercontinental, as well as historical networks into which its initial subjects might fit. It brings to bear many traditions, and many allusions, but it does not offer anything like a conceptual or a political solution. (No actor in the conflict has found one yet.)

And in these respects *The Country* does, as an American book, what Ali's "real ghazal" does as an English-language form. The word *ghazal* first described a genre, in Arabic, a kind of love poem in monorhyme; only once brought to another Islamic culture and another language, Persian, did the word—now literally multicultural—gradually come to mean what it meant for Ali, a form in disconnected couplets with a *radif* (a refrain) and a *qasida* (a rhyme before the refrain), along with a *takhallus* near the end, a pseudonym or personal name. The ghazal circulated through Urdu and German, Turkish and Indonesian, but it became popular in American poetry only through Ali's precepts and examples, starting with two ghazals, later entitled "Arabic" and "Tonight" but in *The Country* entitled simply "Ghazal." Throughout *The Country* Ali—I quote Ramazani once more—"moves freely among intimately felt inheritances from English, American, and Urdu literatures and from Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, and Christianity, mobilizing these against public and private losses." (Ramazani himself is writing only about "Tonight.")¹⁷

Much of *The Country* now seems to show Ali working toward what he learned to do with the form of the ghazal—a form that became so identified with him in American English partly because his most direct stylistic precursors (Merrill, above all) never used it. The rotating repeated words of the Provençal ballade, and the irregularly repeated *water* in "*Son et Lumiere* at Shalimar Garden," pre-

pare us for the returns and repetitions among the ghazals in *Call Me Ishmael Tonight*. Not by coincidence, “*Son et Lumiere*” is a poem of Hindu tradition, where “Brahma’s voice is torn water”: in it a supposedly enclosed garden stands revealed as a site of historical and international connections, from sources of wood to sources of British rule: the poem with its Hindu source abuts the ghazal later retitled “Arabic” (VS 223, 225).

The “real ghazal” for Ali thus became, as Malcolm Woodland writes, “a space where East is Westernized and West Easternized” at the level of form.¹⁸ Its topics and references mingle without fusing, without producing a factitious unity, subsisting instead side by side and taking their places in a network of allusions far larger than any one poem or one place. Ghazal form, as it turns out, almost requires at the level of the single poem the aspects that *The Country* works so hard to achieve at the level of the collection: it must be allusive, it must bring us away from and then back to a central term, it must be at least a bit multicultural and multitrade, and it must *not* cohere sufficiently to prescribe one argument, present one scene, offer one solution to the problems that its apparent subject presents. Its repeated word is the same and not the same as it travels through its contexts, almost as the migrant, the exile, resident alien, or dual citizen is the same and not the same in his various sites, his various countries. We might even find in what Ali called the “autonomous or semi-autonomous couplets” of ghazal form an analogy for the difficult yet peaceful semiautonomy that many Kashmiris have sought, but not won, for Kashmir—an autonomy that is not, and cannot be, complete independence (the couplets are linked to other couplets, still).¹⁹

If Ali’s book about Kashmir prefigured his work with the ghazal, his book of ghazals retraced that connection to Kashmir. Kashmir does not come up by name as often in *Call Me Ishmael Tonight* as it did in any of Ali’s other books—it is, so to speak, present tacitly throughout—but when it does come up Ali takes care, again, to connect it to other troubles, to other scenes. In “Shines,” Jerusalem morphs into the fictive ancient India of *The Waste Land*, and both shine along with “the apricots of Gilgit” (VS 335). “Of Fire” takes in houseboats on Dal Lake and troops on the Siachen glacier: “Soldier: ‘The enemy can see you and that’s how you die.’ / On the world’s roof, breathless, he defends a glacier of fire. // I have come down to my boat to wish myself *Bon Voyage*” (VS 332). The same poem encompasses tributes to fairy tales, to the four elements, to

the Pacific, and to W.S. Merwin, though Kashmir comes back at the end: “Native of Water, Shahid’s brought the Kashmir of fire” (*VS* 332). We do not see much of Srinagar in these poems, but we see Jerusalem repeatedly, along with New York and wartime Baghdad (in “Beyond English”). We also see an effortful syncretism, an attempt to weave together world religions, Islam and Hinduism and Christianity and Judaism, Catholic and Protestant, Sufi and Shiite.

Call Me Ishmael Tonight even returns to the earlier volume’s color code. In the book of ghazals we see, repeatedly, the blue of the Kashmiri sapphire, an alternative to (though not a replacement for) Hindu saffron and Islamic green. Ali turns his blue into a symbol of aestheticism, of excess, and therefore of antinomian piety: “I’m at home, betrothed to blue, with her refracted light” (*VS* 337). “He lives by his wits, wears blue all day, stars all night. / Who would have guessed God would be a spiv forever?” (*VS* 369) Ghazal form alludes to the history of religion while making a poor fit for orthodoxy; Ali’s title ghazal, probably his best-known single poem, identifies him as a traveler between cultures and as a bearer of Islamic—as well as American—tradition: “Call me Ishmael tonight.”

That first of all the ghazals in *Call Me Ishmael Tonight* thus recapitulates the poet’s journey from Srinagar to Massachusetts, connecting them once again through an aesthetic heritage of shared ornamentation, while reminding us, we Anglophone readers, we present-day lovers, that all connections may fail: “I must go back briefly to a place I have loved / to tell you those you will efface I have loved.”²⁰ The poems may go back to Srinagar, but they do not stay there, nor do they tell us Ali can stay there: rather, they connect Srinagar, and even Gilgit and Siachen and Kashmir, more broadly, back to readers elsewhere, in several traditions, and to more beautiful, earlier, never isolated, versions of themselves.

Notes

1. On that influence, see esp. David Caplan, *Questions of Possibility: Contemporary Poetry and Poetic Form* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 53–60; see also Tarina Quraishi, “‘To Meet My Beloved Friend’: Literary Transformations of the Ghazal in English” (undergraduate thesis, Harvard College, 2014), Hoopes Prize collection, Harvard University Archives. Readers with an interest in the multicultural, transnational, or multilingual iterations of ghazal form after Ali will benefit mightily from consulting Quraishi’s work.

2. Agha Shahid Ali, *The Veiled Suite* (New York: Norton, 2009), 44. Subsequent references to this book occur in text as *VS*.
3. Chitralkha Zutshi, *Languages of Belonging: Islam, Regional Identity, and the Making of Kashmir* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 3.
4. Claire Chambers, "'The Last Saffron': Agha Shahid Ali's Kashmir," *Contemporary World Literature* 7 (2011), <http://contemporaryworldliterature.com/blog/essays/the-last-saffron-agha-shahid-ali-s-kashmir-by-claire-chambers/>. Chambers's piece concludes by noting twenty-first-century fiction writers and critics who cite or pay homage to *The Country without a Post Office*.
5. Zutshi, *Languages of Belonging*, 16, 21.
6. Victoria Schofield, *Kashmir in Conflict*, 2nd ed. (London: I. B. Tauris, 2002), 143.
7. *Ibid.*, 182–84, 199.
8. Wai Chee Dimock, "Hemispheric Islam: Continents and Centuries for American Literature," *American Literary History* 21.1 (2009): 28–52, 37, 44.
9. John Hollander, *The Figure of Echo* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 129.
10. Carolyn Forché, ed. *Against Forgetting: Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness* (New York: Norton, 1993), 42.
11. Zutshi, *Languages of Belonging*, 333.
12. Jahan Ramazani, *A Transnational Poetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 159, 160.
13. Christian Benvenuto, "Agha Shahid Ali," *Massachusetts Review* 43.2 (2002): 261–73, 266.
14. John Pizer, "Goethe's 'World Literature' Paradigm and Contemporary Cultural Globalization," *Comparative Literature* 52.3 (2000): 213–27, 213. Larger arguments over the history of *Weltliteratur* continue in German departments as well as in comparatist venues; many of them involve either debates internal to German Romanticism or arguments about the translation of non-English literary texts into modern English, neither of which need concern us here.
15. John Pizer, *The Idea of a World Literature* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006), 6–7.
16. Pizer, "Goethe's 'World Literature' Paradigm," 214.
17. Ramazani, *Transnational Poetics*, 105.
18. Malcolm Woodland, "Memory's Homeland: Agha Shahid Ali and the Hybrid Ghazal," *English Studies in Canada* 31.2–3 (2005): 249–72, 255.
19. On Ali's ghazals as transnational, see also Nishat Zaidi, "Center/Margin Dialectics and the Poetic Form: The Ghazals of Agha Shahid Ali," *Annual of Urdu Studies* 23 (2008): 55–67.
20. Agha Shahid Ali, *Call Me Ishmael Tonight* (New York: Norton, 2003), 25.

The Shifting Nationalisms of Agha Shahid Ali's Poetry

The Kashmiri American poet Agha Shahid Ali writes from the perspective of a poet based in Delhi, the capital of India, in *The Half-Inch Himalayas* (1989), the first book in his collected poems *The Veiled Suite*. His work is imbued with a spirited sense of Indian nationalism. Ghosh characterizes this nationalism as occurring in an earlier generation: Ali's "political views were inherited largely from his father, whose beliefs were akin to those of most secular, left-leaning Muslim intellectuals of the Nehruvian era."¹ This sense of Indian nationalism that undergirds the poems in *The Half-Inch Himalayas* shifted first with Ali's immigration to the United States and then completely when an insurgency flared up violently in Kashmir in 1989. Thus *The Country without a Post Office* (1998), the fifth book in *The Veiled Suite*, is imbued with a very different Kashmiri separatist nationalism. These radical shifts in Ali's nationalism, I believe, had a seismic effect on his poetry. Ali's shifting nationalism parallels the historic shift from decolonizing optimism to postcolonial pessimism. This shift is important because it abandons the collective transnational struggle of colonial subjects across the colonial world. Thus we see a narrowing of Ali's traverse of concern from the whole world to only Kashmir. "As windows close on Kashmir"² so do the emancipatory and progressive possibilities in the poems. As the postcolonial Indian state turns violently on its own Kashmiri citizens, the darkened vision of the poems is the direct result of the failed promises of decolonization. Only as anger subsides, though grief remains, does Ali's nationalism slowly revert back to the Nehruvian secular Indian nationalism in his subsequent books.

What, in light of this shifting nationalism found in his poetry, are the limits of postcolonial poetry? What kind of contradictions can one expect to see in Ali's postcolonial poetry as neocolonial and imperial forces pick up steam at the tail end of the Cold War?

The best way to grapple with these questions is to begin with

Ali's *The Half-Inch Himalayas*, where one can clearly see his Indian nationalism at play. Ali was born in Delhi but moved to Kashmir, only to return to Delhi at age nineteen to do graduate work, spending his next seven years there; thus he writes from the perspective of a Delhi poet. His unambiguous Indian nationalist identity springs from Delhi's cultural, architectural, and artistic treasures, as well as his father's Kashmir (where Ali grew up) and his mother's Lucknow (in the Indian province of Uttar Pradesh). His Delhi poems lay out the topography of his beloved city with a native son's pride: Delhi Railway Station (near Chandni Chowk), Purana Qila (Old Fort), Jama Masjid (the great mosque in Delhi), Chandni Chowk (the market built by the Mughal emperor Shahjahan and designed by his daughter Jahan Ara), Daryaganj, and Golcha Cinema. By celebrating Delhi, the capital of independent India, and its past as the capital of the Mughal dynasty, Ali restores the severed continuity of Indian pre- and postcolonial histories. It is as a Delhi poet that Ali writes poems about Kashmir tinged with nostalgia ("Postcard from Kashmir," "Snowmen," "Cracked Portraits") or about the city of Lucknow ("The Season of the Plains," "A Monsoon Note on Old Age"). In other poems Ali fosters a sense of community and shared cultural and artistic traditions that flourished under the Mughals by foregrounding famous ghazal singers like Begum Akhtar in many of his poems. If his poetry is "Urdu-haunted,"³ it is no surprise that Delhi's past residents include two of Urdu's greatest poets, Mirza Ghalib and Mir Taqi Mir. While buying meat, in "A Butcher," the poet trades lines from Mir and Ghalib with the butcher, an exchange possible only in the extant poetic culture of Delhi with deep roots in the city:

I smile and quote

a Ghalib line; he completes
the couplet, smiles,

quotes a Mir line. I
complete the couplet.⁴

In another Delhi poem, "After Seeing Kozintsev's *King Lear* in Delhi," Ali finds India's postindependence culture lamentably dominated by Indian commercial cinema, "the Bollywood spectacular."⁵ But especially grievous and deplorable for the poet is the state of the once opulent and stately street of Chandni Chowk, which was

part of the royal neighborhood of Mughal Delhi. As he steps into the depredation of the now slum-like Chandni Chowk, he is reminded of the utter indifference and wanton destructiveness of British rule, whose effects are still visible despite decolonization. The Mughal past obliterated by colonialism is recovered and reunited with his Indian present of the city of Delhi. The poet's thoughts go to the defining moment of the destruction of Indian elite culture during the Raj—the exile of the last Mughal emperor of India, who was also an important patron of culture and arts, to Rangoon, Burma. Ali repeats King Lear's accusation, "You are men of stones,"⁶ now directed at the British colonial rulers of India as Ali imagines in horror the punishment for the Rebellion of 1857 meted out to the last Mughal emperor of India, Bahadur Shah Zafar II:

I think of Zafar, poet and Emperor,
Being led through this street
By British soldiers, his feet in chains,
To watch his sons hanged.⁷

In "Dacca Gauzes" Ali delves into colonial history again. The poem is about the ethereal yet recoverable nature of memory of lost objects. For what has been lost, Dacca muslin cloth, can be conjured back into existence only with the help of memory: given the right conditions, for the briefest of moments, the intangible can be experienced again as tangible. Dacca muslin, no longer manufactured, had become a casualty of the colonial economic policy of deindustrialization of India by any means possible, including violence:

In history we learned: the hands
Of weavers were amputated,
The looms of Bengal silenced,

and the cotton shipped raw
by the British to England.⁸

Jahan Ramazani is partly correct to identify "Dacca Gauzes" and other poems as "anti-compensatory elegizing," for "attempts to redress these catastrophic losses" are impossible since the "poem also acknowledges the impossibility of compensating for the atrocities it memorializes."⁹ But the ultimate compensation for the degradations of colonialism was decolonization, and the poem is built on that event and should be read in the light of that event. Without

decolonization's compensation, the poem would sink into utter hopelessness. The vision of the poem depends on the inexorable eventuality of decolonization that "supposedly" made the occurrence of such atrocities impossible.

In a poem like "Homage to Faiz Ahmed Faiz," a virtuoso postcolonial poem, Ali demonstrates his deep knowledge of and solidarity with anticolonial struggles ranging across the postcolonial world—solidarities only an Indian nationalist of independent India could make, an avowal that becomes impossible later in his Kashmir poems of *The Country without a Post Office*. To situate the Pakistani communist poet Faiz Ahmad Faiz in the relevant political and historical context, neighboring Pakistan, nineteenth-century British India, and Lebanon all make their appearances in the poem. Ali begins with this politically daring stanza, addressing Faiz:

You [Faiz] wrote this from Beirut, two years before
The Sabra-Shatila massacres. That city's
Refugee air was open, torn
By jets and the voices of reporters.
As always, you were witness to "rains of stones."¹⁰

In these five lines not only are we told of the Pakistani communist poet Faiz Ahmad Faiz's last place of exile, but in the true postcolonial fashion, Ali reveals historical truths that from a Western neoimperial perspective might seem inconvenient and disconcerting. Ali provocatively declares solidarity with the Palestinian cause by describing the neocolonial Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, during which Israel's allies, the Christian Phalangists, massacred Palestinians living in the refugee camps. The poem announces to the world that its anticolonial position is not mired in isolation and hopelessness but is in solidarity with others. From Beirut the poem moves to Faiz's home country in an equally startling stanza:

though you were away from Pakistan, from
the laws of home which said: the hands
of thieves will be surgically
amputated: But the subcontinent always spoke
to you in Ghalib's Urdu, . . .¹¹

These lines describe one of many instances of public spectacles of horror that were visited upon Pakistani civil society in the late 1970s and 1980s. In these few lines, he highlights the degradation of

the postcolonial state resulting in violence against its own citizens. The state's actions and discourse mirror each other in barbarity and certitude, yet Ali reminds us that Faiz kept alive, by his poetry and his personal example, the great Urdu poet Ghalib's discourse and language of civility and irony. Ghalib had been witness to similar spectacles of violence and barbarity under British rule. The destruction of Pakistani civil society was euphemistically referred to in the West and Pakistan as the Islamization of the Pakistani state—a key component of the West's Cold War strategy.

Ali ends the poem by embracing on his own terms Faiz's revolutionary vision. But first he leads the reader through the intricacies of Faiz's singular achievement in Urdu poetry:

you had redefined the cruel
beloved, that figure who already
was Friend, Woman, God? In your hands

she was revolution . . .¹²

That is, he considers Faiz's transformative use of classical Urdu poetic tropes for twentieth-century radical political purposes. In the hands of Faiz, "the cruel beloved" becomes "Revolution." Ali asks "what could it mean to a boy"¹³—this mix of radical ideology couched in classical Urdu poetic idiom. In an ironic move resembling Faiz's own transformative achievement in Urdu poetry, Ali transforms the revolutionary communist poet Faiz into the more acceptable figure of the dissident or, as Ali puts it in the last phrase of the poem, "the rebel face of hope."¹⁴ This move in turn prefigures Ali's own transformation from a hopeful Indian nationalist who takes on Western excesses, past or present, to a despairing dissident poet who has to catalogue his own postcolonial government's excesses for the West.

Before we look at the effects of his changed nationalism on the postcolonial nature of his Kashmir poems in *The Country without a Post Office*, let us quickly look at why the previously peaceful Kashmir (of *The Half-Inch Himalayas*) became a place of communal strife, bloodshed, terror, torture, disappearances, and military prisons. This will help us realize the completely new political realities that Ali and his poems confronted after 1989. In a *Le Nouvel Observateur* interview in 1998 Zbigniew Brzezinski, President Jimmy Carter's national security advisor, had the following to say when asked about the origins of the CIA's covert operation in Afghanistan:

INTERVIEWER: The former director of the CIA, Robert Gates, stated in his memoirs [*From the Shadows*], that American intelligence services began to aid the Mujahadeen in Afghanistan 6 months before the Soviet intervention. . . . Is that correct?

BRZEZINSKI [REPLIES]: Yes. . . . the reality, secretly guarded until now, is completely otherwise. Indeed, it was July 3, 1979 that President Carter signed the first directive for secret aid to the opponents of the pro-Soviet regime in Kabul. And that very day, I wrote a note to the president in which I explained to him that in my opinion this aid was going to induce a Soviet military intervention.¹⁵

To a question about the consequences of supporting Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism, Brzezinski famously answered,

BRZEZINSKI: What is most important to the history of the world? The Taliban or the collapse of the Soviet empire? Some stirred-up Moslems or the liberation of Central Europe and the end of the cold war?¹⁶

The decision to destabilize the secular, progressive Afghan government in order to lure the Soviets into Afghanistan was Brzezinski's idea. This neocolonial war against the Afghan government (which lasted into the early 1990s) is on record to be the largest covert operation in the history of CIA, which it outsourced to ISI (the Pakistani military intelligence). It led directly to the subsequent destabilization of Indian Kashmir. After the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, some militants from Afghanistan as well as militants from Pakistan moved into the neighboring and already troubled Kashmir. Mahmood Mamdani explains the spillover from Afghanistan to Kashmir:

The Islamization of the anti-Soviet struggle both drew inspiration from and reinforced the Islamization of the Pakistani state under Zia. Second, the more the Afghan jihad gathered momentum, the more it fed a regional offshoot, the Kashmiri jihad.¹⁷

Islamization of the Pakistani state and its military intelligence agencies led to the policy of giving support to "paramilitary forces" (jihad organizations) who, having "liberated" Afghanistan, were also willing to "'liberate' Indian Kashmir. . . . Thus Afghan jihad came to be joined to the Kashmiri jihad."¹⁸

So in fact the Indian Army was battling “a regional offshoot, the Kashmiri jihad,” but with a catastrophic effect on the civilian population of Kashmir. Thus the Kashmir of *The Country without a Post Office* is not the idyllic, paradisiacal, mythical Kashmir of Ali’s childhood of *The Half-Inch Himalayas*. The tremendous loss of life and irrevocable destruction of the previously inclusive, pluralistic, culturally and religiously diverse, and tolerant Kashmir forms the core of Ali’s “anti-compensatory elegizing” poetry.¹⁹

Seeing the brutalization of Kashmir at the hands of the Indian Army compelled Ali to reject his previous Indian nationalism and to embrace Kashmiri separatist nationalism. That shift put the subject of Kashmir at the very center of his poetry, unlike before. The city of Delhi vanishes, replaced by a menacing New Delhi, the imperious capital of the India that subjugates Kashmir from five hundred miles away. Previously a poet who wrote confidently from the center, Ali now imagines himself writing from Srinagar, Kashmir, back to the center (India). The emancipatory energies of anticolonialism and anti-imperialism are redirected against the brutality of the Indian military occupation of Kashmir. The work of the recovery of India is abandoned, while recovery and rescue of Kashmir as a separate community and geographical territory from India takes priority. Yet Kashmir is not just in conflict with the military forces of the Indian state but is in detrimental and fatal conflict with itself. It is this internal Kashmiri divisiveness that haunts his later Kashmir poems and his newfound Kashmiri nationalism.

As Kashmir begins to blow up in earnest, Ali, in *The Country without a Post Office*, could no longer appeal to secular forces in the region on the issue of atrocities committed by Islamic militants against the Hindu minority. They did not exist anymore. Afghan communists and the Russians had already lost out to the same Islamic militants. Looking to Pakistan was useless. It had already undergone Islamization. On the issue of brutalities committed by the Indian Army, Ali could no longer appeal to his fellow Indian citizens, for they supported, for the most part, their government’s position on Kashmir. The older “anti-colonial poetic solidarities” had become impossible in the new political realities of a post-Cold War world. In the later Kashmir poems and ghazals Ali was forced to forge new “poetic alliances” with the forces of anticommunism (the West) that had unleashed the Islamic militancy in the region in the first place.

Ali renounces his Indian identity and nationalism in the very

first, introductory poem of *The Country without a Post Office*, “The Blessed Word: A Prologue,” by attacking the allegedly benevolent Mughal rule over Kashmir. Ali claims in the fashion of a true Kashmiri nationalist that Kashmir has not been free for the last five hundred years, not since the time when Emperor Akbar (commonly acknowledged to be the most enlightened and tolerant of Mughal emperors) subjugated Kashmir and Kashmiris rose up in a “frenzied opposition to [the tyranny of] Moghul rule.”²⁰

Ali stitches metaphors from the English version of Osip Mandelstam’s Russian poem “We shall meet again in Petersburg” onto “The Blessed Word.” Kashmir is in an acute and exigent state, “as though we had buried the sun there,”²¹ declares Ali, almost speechless with despair. Ali hopes to reinvent Srinagar just as Mandelstam reinvented Petersburg in his poems. Ali could then *will* Kashmir back from the Indian military occupation’s curfews, midnight arrests, and disappearances, from the “black Velvet void,”²² Mandelstam’s descriptor for the Soviet Union’s internal repression of its citizens. Appealing to the Western sense of injustice and outrage by invoking Mandelstam’s poem, when the West was party to Kashmir’s destruction, is the supreme irony. For Ali to compare the Indian state’s repression of Kashmir not to some Western-sponsored state oppression, say in Guatemala or Honduras, but to the Soviet Union is baffling. This is a far cry from the anti-imperial stance of such poems as “Homage to Faiz Ahmad Faiz.”

Ironically, right at moment of the heightened sense of being Kashmiri, Ali finds that the new separatist Kashmir has no place for him. His minority status as a Shia Muslim and his secular humanist values automatically exclude him in a Kashmir overwhelmed by the fundamentalism of a Sunni-led insurgency. He calls out in anguish to this indifferent Kashmir in the opening couplet of the poem simply titled “Ghazal” in *The Country without a Post Office*:

Where are you now? Who lies beneath your spell tonight
before you agonize him in farewell tonight?²³

Ali accuses Kashmir of rejecting not just him but other Kashmiri minorities as well. Ali categorically rejects this “farewell” in the revised version of “Ghazal,” retitled “Tonight” in *Call Me Ishmael Tonight*, in the second to last couplet: “This is mere insult, this is no farewell tonight.”²⁴ “Farewell” is not a lovers’ parting of ways, as it would be classically interpreted, but a forced expulsion of minori-

ties by outsiders (foreign militants) and the self-appointed leaders of the Kashmiri majority. This becomes clearer when we look at the reworked opening couplet in “Tonight”:

Where are you now? Who lies beneath your spell tonight?
Whom else from rapture’s road will you expel tonight?²⁵

“Agonize” and “farewell” morph into the very explicit, irrevocable “expel.” An answer to the question posed in the second line of the above couplet is found a few couplets down, also in its second line:

In the heart’s veined temple, all statues have been smashed.
No priest in saffron’s left to toll its knell tonight.²⁶

The separatist Sunni-led insurgents had made the practice of Hindu religion and culture impossible in Kashmir with violent attacks on temples, forcing an expulsion of the Hindu Pandit community of Kashmir. To boot, the inclusive, nonsectarian, Sufi Islam with its shrines was also under attack in Kashmir. As mayhem was unleashed on the pluralistic cultural norms and religious beliefs of Kashmiris by Sunni fundamentalist “belief,” the disaffected, disenchanted believer, Ali, had become the latest refugee:

I beg for haven: Prisons, let open your gates—
A refugee from Belief seeks a cell tonight²⁷

Thus we find that Ali deals with a much more complicated postcolonial variation on the classic “anticolonial war of liberation.” For Ali not only has to deal with separatist violence directed against the postcolonial Indian state and the Indian state’s indiscriminate violence against Kashmir, but he also has to contend with the sectarian, religiously based violence of the insurgency against the ordinary Kashmiri majority as well as minorities. The poetry that comes out of this calamity can be neither hortatory or hopeful, only elegiac.

Since “Tonight,” the final and longest version of the poem “Ghazal,” appears in Ali’s last book, published two years after his death in 2001, we can confidently say that the poem expresses his last word on Kashmir. Each of its couplets reiterates and mirrors his engagement with Kashmir found in the various poems in *The Country without a Post Office*. But what is surprising (or inevitable) about the following couplet is the ambivalence toward his separatist Kashmiri nationalism that he had come to adopt:

Mughal ceilings, let your mirrored convexities
Multiply me at once under your spell tonight.²⁸

Tired of the role of a dissident poet consigned to cataloguing the excesses of the Indian Army, Ali appeals for the return of Mughal ceilings over Kashmir. Mughal ceilings, with their “mirrored convexities,” symbolize the tolerant, pluralistic, and inclusive culture—a synthesis of Hinduism and Islam—of precolonial Mughal rule. Ali returns to the ethos of an Indian nationalism bound up in part with celebrating Mughal rule and its political and social legacy as the only way out of the poetry of the graveyard and back to the poetry of the sky.

Notes

1. Ghosh, “Ghat of the Only World.”
2. Ali, *Veiled Suite*, 43.
3. Ramazani, *Transnational Poetics*, 19.
4. Ali, *Veiled Suite*, 47.
5. *Ibid.*, 50.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*, 42–43.
9. Ramazani, *Transnational Poetics*, 125.
10. Ali, *Veiled Suite*, 56.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*, 57.
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid.*, 59.
15. Brzezinski, interview, 75.
16. *Ibid.*
17. Mamdani, “Good Muslims, Bad Muslims,” 771.
18. Mamdani, *Good Muslims, Bad Muslims*, 151.
19. Ramazani, *Transnational Poetics*, 19.
20. Ali, *Veiled Suite*, 171.
21. *Ibid.*
22. *Ibid.*
23. *Ibid.*, 193.
24. *Ibid.*, 375.
25. *Ibid.*, 374.
26. *Ibid.*
27. *Ibid.*
28. *Ibid.*

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SYED HUMAYOUN

Missing Home, Imagining Violence

Agha Shahid Ali's Engagement with Kashmir

In the postcolonial era, migration is the norm. People travel willingly or are forced to move in search of a job, an education, a business, or because of war, natural disaster, forced labor, and so on. Such widespread dispersal of peoples from their homelands results in nostalgia and the creation of a diaspora. *Diaspora* dates to the Greeks, for whom it was a horticultural term “derived from the Greek verb *speiro* (to sow) and the preposition *dia* (over)”¹ The term was later applied to human migrations, as this “etymology of seeds and sperm as carriers of both culture and reproductive capacity is central to this description of diaspora, too.”²

Émigré writers have creatively dealt with the issue of diaspora and homelessness in their writings. Agha Shahid Ali's poem “Postcard from Kashmir” is one such diasporic poem, in which Ali deals with his past, present, and future relationship with Kashmir: an engagement via memory.

Kashmir shrinks into my mailbox;
my home a neat four by six inches.

I always loved neatness. Now I hold
the half-inch Himalayas in my hand.
This is home. And this the closest
I'll ever be to home. When I return,
the colours won't be so brilliant,
the Jhelum's waters so clean,
so ultramarine. My love
so overexposed.
And my memory will be a little
out of focus, in I
a giant negative, black
and white, still underdeveloped.³

The shrinking of Kashmir in the mailbox for Ali is the attenuation of home as an image or illustration in the mind that is imagined, created, and illusory but always there to enable the writer to be ever home. This image is based on reminiscences that are distant and blurred, and when the writer returns to the “imaginary homeland”⁴ he may be shocked to see the contrast between the real and the imagined. While the imagined is idyllic, immaculate, and beautiful, the reality is that the Jhelum won’t be “so clean, so ultramarine.”⁵ This mental, surreal image is described by the poet as “a giant negative, black / and white, still underdeveloped.”⁶ Jahan Ramazani says that the poem “suggests that memory and artifice transform the very past he pursues.”⁷ Home thus becomes a gothic image that “exists in a fractured, discontinuous relationship with the present.”⁸ Ali’s concept of home is similar to that of Salman Rushdie, who talks about a black-and-white photograph taken before the date of his birth, 1946. The photograph, hanging on a wall, had created a mental image of home in his mind, and when he returned the colorful reality surprised his black-and-white memory.⁹ Ali’s memories, however, do not disown him; instead they keep up with him and enable him, as Rushdie says, to “look back in the knowledge.”¹⁰ Ramazani says about the poem that “the postcolonial poem, like a postcard, risks miniaturizing, idealizing and ultimately displacing the remembered native landscape.”¹¹

As Joseph Amato has said, drawing on Tolstoy’s famous line, “All diasporas are unhappy, but every diaspora is unhappy in its own way.”¹² In that way, Agha Shahid Ali’s birth and upbringing had a lasting effect on his writing and his experience of diaspora. He was born in Kashmir in a literary household where English, Urdu, and Persian were spoken. He considered Urdu his mother tongue and was highly influenced by Urdu poetry and music. However, he began writing in English from a very young age. Like several other writers of this globalized era, he possessed a multiple identity by virtue of having lived in many places and been influenced by many cultures. His early education was split between Kashmir and America, where his parents were pursuing doctorate degrees at Ball State Teacher’s College, Indiana. He received his BA from Kashmir University and his MA in English from Delhi University. He would teach there until leaving for America in 1975. He earned a PhD from Pennsylvania State University in 1985 and completed his MFA at the University of Arizona. He went on to teach at the University of Massachusetts, the University of Utah, and Hamilton College.

Wherever he lived, Ali visited his parents during summers in Srinagar, Kashmir, and Kashmir remained his first and last love.

Ali's engagement with his home is twofold: first, it is a loss of the idyll where every man is an Adam, longing for return after being cast out of paradise; second, it is a mourning of the violence and terror of Kashmir. "The Blessed Word: A Prologue," a prose poem, opens Ali's book *The Country without a Post Office*. In this piece he juxtaposes the atrocities committed in the 1990s by Indian forces in Kashmir with Joseph Stalin's (1927–53) rule in the Soviet Union, in which more than twenty million people were murdered in Lenin-grad (St. Petersburg). Ali quotes the epigraph from Osip Mandelstam's untitled poem "We shall meet again in Petersburg."

In Ali's poem, Srinagar, too, is now black with atrocities, for "When you leave in the morning, you never know when you'll return."¹³ This has now become a daily tragedy in Kashmir, and the grief of Habba Khatun,—a sixteenth-century Kashmiri poet who sang elegies for her husband, a king captured by Akbar—becomes everybody's grief. Everybody, Ali senses, seems to share the poignant longings with which the "hills have re-echoed for four hundred years, the songs of Habba Khatun."¹⁴

In henna I have dyed my hands,
When will he come?
I die, while he roams distant lands,
My heart is numb!
O, where is now the day's delight?
I've waited long. (Khatoon)¹⁵

Mandelstam "invents Petersburg (I [Ali], Srinagar), an imaginary homeland."¹⁶ St. Petersburg is imaginary for Mandelstam because the city is present neither in name nor as a capital, devastated by catastrophic events.¹⁷ On Mandelstam's fixation regarding St. Petersburg, Marshal Berman says, "No writer was more obsessed with Petersburg's passing away, or more determined to remember and redeem what was lost, than Osip Mandelstam."¹⁸ For Ali, Srinagar is imaginary because he is living in the United States (c.f. Rushdie's imaginary homeland), imagining the destruction and catastrophe of the city.

"The Blessed Word" is a prose poem with poetic elements like rhythm, rhyme, and repetition. The juxtaposition of Mandelstam's poem has an important role to play in the structure of the prose

poem, creating a poetic effect. As Hans Bertens remarks, "Parallelism and juxtaposing go hand in hand to create a 'poetic' effect in a prose text."¹⁹ In the first section of part 2 Ali cries into the void all the possible ways of pronouncing the name of his motherland, Kashmir. The various pronunciations reflect his desperate longing for and lament for the tragedy of his motherland.

kashmir, Kaschmir, Cashmere, Qashmir, Cashmir, Cashmire,
Kashmere, Cachemire, Cushmeer, Cachmiere, Casmir. Or

Cauchemar

in a sea of stories? Or: Kacmir, Kaschemir, Kasmere, Kachmire,
Kasmir. Kerseymere?²⁰

According to Geetha Dore, "The homophonic play with the name "Kashmir" . . . is . . . a childish sputtering symbolically manipulating the presence and absence of the mother figure, a loud and repeated cry from depth of [an] adult poet's soul that echoes in the valley."²¹

In the second section of part 2 Ali quotes almost half of Mandelstam's poem in indirect speech, comparing the condition of Srinagar with Mandelstam's bleak portrayal of St. Petersburg. In part 3 he does away with Mandelstam and St. Petersburg as Srinagar becomes the point of focus. Ali alludes to the Quranic story in which God "must melt sometimes"²² to save Ibrahim's son Ishmael. This day, celebrated by Muslims as Id-uz-Zuha, is marked by curfew in Kashmir. Though Ishmael, being the son of a prophet, escaped death, Kashmiri parents mourn for their children because "Son after son—never to return from the night of torture—was taken away"²³

The poem ends with a hope that Kashmiris will surely speak the blessed word for the first time someday. "The blessed word with no meaning"²⁴ might refer to the end of violence and Kashmir's yearning for "those days of peace when we all were in love and the rain was in our hands wherever we went." It can mean anything, as "Mandelstam gives no clue."²⁵ As Marshall Berman says, "The 'blessed word with no meaning' is surely 'Petersburg' itself, which has been emptied of meaning by 'the black velvet void' of the Soviet night."²⁶ For Ali it is surely Kashmir and its freedom.

Kashmir is one of the oldest places where people settled and lived, and in ancient times it was free and not ruled by any external power except by Ashoka in the third century BC. But soon after Ashoka's death "Kashmir once more regained its independence."²⁷

Akbar invaded Kashmir in the sixteenth century, and the Mughal conquest, as Victoria Schofield explains, marks “the beginning of Kashmir’s modern history.”²⁸ The Mughal empire, however, began to decline by the eighteenth century. Afghan rule followed when Ahmad Shah Durrani invaded the valley in 1792, a period remembered as one of severe oppression. This was followed by a period of Sikh rule, considered to be the darkest period ever in the history of Kashmir. Continuing this legacy of tyranny was the Dogra rule.

In 1846, under the Treaty of Lahore, Kashmir acceded to the British. The state of Jammu and Kashmir was created when Raja Gulab Singh acquired Kashmir from the East India Company. After the partition of India in 1947, Kashmir’s fate remained undecided with Maharaja Hari Singh’s decision to stay neutral. The maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir acceded to India in October 1947, after tribesmen from the Northwest Frontier Province of Pakistan invaded Kashmir. This was followed by Pakistan occupying Azad Kashmir and India occupying the rest of Kashmir.²⁹ In January 1949 India approached the UN, which decided that a plebiscite was the only possible solution for Jammu and Kashmir. India and Pakistan have fought three wars over Kashmir, in 1947, 1965 and 1972, which resulted in no change in the conflict.

In 1987 the Muslim United Front, expected to win the elections, alleged rigging—leading to mass protests throughout Kashmir. This led to the rise of militancy followed by the exodus of Hindus and severe Indian repression that continues to this day. Sumantra Bose sums it up well: “For the last six decades Kashmir has been a paradise lost, its people trapped in the vortex of a bitter sovereignty dispute between India and Pakistan over their lives and land”³⁰

Agha Shahid Ali’s engagement with home, particularly with reference to violence and counterviolence, is to a large extent nationalistic. This, however, is not chauvinistic, but a natural extension of loving his homeland. As Portuguli would tell us, the “main elements of nationalism are ‘territory, place and environment’ (i.e. spatial entities) in relation to people and their collective memories (i.e. temporal memories).”³¹ Ali’s spatial entities consisted of Srinagar, the river Jhelum, Dal Lake, fields of saffron, and other aspects of the city and surrounding landscape. Similarly, his temporal memories were engaged with his memories of family, childhood, and so on. With the rise of violence in Kashmir, however, this spatial vision shifted from a beautiful and pristine vision of his homeland to the horror of bloodshed in Srinagar. Similarly, his temporal entities now imag-

ined the “naked boy screaming,”³² a dismembered body, sons who left never to return home. Thus the mood of his poems changes from song to suffering in diaspora.

“I See Kashmir from New Delhi at Midnight” is one of the most poignant elegies in *The Country without a Post Office*. He talks about the curfewed night in which the shadow of a boy “is running away to find its body.” The shadow turns into nothing inside an interrogation center where we can only hear a cry, “I know nothing.”³³ Ali tries to give us a glimpse of the interrogation and torture Kashmiri boys underwent, where they were subjected to unbearable conditions like staying in harmful bright light for days, undergoing electric shocks, and having burning cigarette bits stubbed out on their limbs, their nails plucked off, salt and pepper put on them, and so on.

Rizwan was a teenager, a son of Molvi Abdul Hai, to whom Ali dedicated his poem. He crossed the border in the early 1990s and got killed there while coming back. He is among those unburied boys who never returned. His father later built a college in memory of his son, named Rizwan College of Education, where poor students are given a free education.³⁴

In the poem Rizwan suggests to Ali, “Each night put Kashmir in your dreams,”³⁵ and Ali has tried to do the same in *The Country without a Post Office*. Rizwan, who has been cold a long time, pleads with Ali to not inform his father of his death. Ali “follow[s] him through blood on the road,”³⁶ and as the sound of mothers grieving is heard, “snow begins to fall . . . like ash.”³⁷ This can be a literal image, the consequence of houses set afire by soldiers, or it could also be, as Faheen says, “a reference to a scene in Steven Spielberg’s *Schindler’s List* where ash flying from the burning bodies of Jews appears for a moment as snow,”³⁸ sketching an image of holocaust and apocalypse.

Ali, while writing the poem, appears to have had a mindset of winter that seems to echo Wallace Stevens’s poem “The Snow Man.” We find a lot of references to harsh climatic conditions, representative of the terrible situation in Kashmir.

One must have a mind of winter
To regard the frost and the boughs³⁹
One must wear jeweled ice in dry plains
To will the distant mountains to glass⁴⁰

Likewise, lines like “His hands crusted with snow,” “I have been cold a long, long time,” and “it shrinks almost into nothing, is / nothing by interrogation gates”⁴¹ echo Stevens’s lines “Of the pine-trees crusted with snow,” “And have been cold a long time,” and “who listens in the snow, And, nothing himself,”⁴² respectively. David Perkins says that “The Snow Man” “embodies Stevens’ central theme, the relation between imagination and reality. . . . Perhaps the snowman beheld nothing only because he was ‘nothing himself.’”⁴³ Ali also talks about imagining: “to will the distant mountains to glass” because when he “see[s] Kashmir from New Delhi at Midnight”⁴⁴ he imagines the violence rather than witnessing it. Perkins goes on to say that in Stevens’s poem “we may note that the poem posits two types of listener. One would hear a ‘misery’ in the sound of the wind. . . . The other listener would hear nothing more than the sound of the wind.”⁴⁵ Ali’s poem also has two speakers; one faces reality and cries “I know nothing,” while the other imagines the cry from the far-off place. Rizwan represents the former and Ali represents the latter.

Intimations are given that Rizwan is the poet’s double; his Other, who stayed in Kashmir and was killed. Shadows also intimate menace and threat, as with the shadowy figures of the Indian security forces, but also the shadows of boys “disappeared” from their homes, their bodies never found.⁴⁶

Mirza Waheed’s novel *The Collaborator* talks about the boys who met such a fate. Toward the end of the novel its nameless narrator burns the dead bodies of the boys rotting near the borders.

Boys from the city, boys from the village, boys from towns, boys from saffron fields, boys from the mountains, boys from the plains; rich boys, poor boys, only-child boys, and boys with sisters at home; weak boys, strong boys, big boys, small boys, singer boys, thinker boys, lonesome boys, naked boys, scared boys, martyr boys, brave boys, guerrilla boys, commander boys, *soyeth* winnable sidekick boys, orphan boys, unknown boys and famous boys, boys—⁴⁷

Rizwan represents them all: all the boys of Kashmir who went missing, who died during interrogation, and who died while crossing the border or through “collateral damage.”

Ali laments Rizwan's death by referring to the tomb of a saint where the restless shadow must be resting after it could not find its bullet-torn body that remained "unburied . . . in the mountains,"⁴⁸ "his blood sheer rubies on Himalayan snow."⁴⁹ He has tied a knot in green thread at Shah Hamdan's shrine, to be untied only when the atrocities end. In South Asian Muslim culture many Muslims tie a knot in a piece of cloth or thread at a Sufi shrine and make a wish. When the wish gets fulfilled, they go back to the shrine and untie the knot. Ali seems to have tied a knot on behalf of the Kashmiri people "to be / untied only when atrocities / are stunned by [Rizwan's] jeweled return"⁵⁰: when peace and normalcy return.

Ali also speaks about Rizwan in the letter/poem "Dear Shahid," where Rizwan the martyr is juxtaposed with Rizwan the gatekeeper of heaven or what Ali calls "Guardian of the Gates of Paradise."⁵¹ Thus the death of the guardian of paradise on earth, Kashmir, symbolizes the future of paradise without its guardian; it is attacked and ruled by anybody, and its people humiliated.⁵² The poem sketches, with utmost gloom, a record of events in times of adversity. When he puts the scream of a naked boy, "I know nothing"⁵³ in writing, Ali records the voice that was silenced forever. When we read the poem, we can hear the cry itself.

During the early 1990s, when militancy began in Kashmir, Hindus popularly known as Kashmiri Pandits were also forced to leave the valley. They were caught between militants who had killed some Hindus and a state that had failed to protect them.⁵⁴ Many Kashmiris mourned the departure of Kashmiri Pandits, and Agha Shahid Ali does the same in exile. The poem "Farewell" laments this departure and reminds readers of the poet's sorrow for the people "who became refugees in their own country": "At a certain point I lost track of you."⁵⁵ The poem starts with the subjective *I*, as feelings are personal and the whole poem is in the voice of the poet. In "The Country without a Post Office," however, this *I* turns into *us*,⁵⁶ where the poet represents all the Kashmiris who lament the exile of the Hindus. In this state of oppression, Ali wants to tell the Hindus in exile that the Kashmiris have not forgotten them. He mingles memory and history together while sharing his pain with fellow sufferers: "Your history gets in the way of my memory. / I am everything you lost. You can't forgive me."⁵⁷ Even though he laments the exodus of Hindus, there is hope for the return of both Pandits and peace. In "A Pastoral," Ali again hopes for the return of Hindus from exile and the return of peace. He feels they will meet

in Srinagar, “by the gates of the Villa of peace,”⁵⁸ but this return is possible only when “the soldiers return the keys and disappear,”⁵⁹ that is, only when Kashmir becomes free.

Ali doesn't only feel for repressed Muslims and exiled Hindus. He also wrote an elegy in memory of Hans Christian Ostro, a Norwegian traveler taken hostage by Al-Faran militants in August 1995 and later beheaded.⁶⁰ The poem exemplifies Ali's humanitarian concerns. His lament is full of pathos: “I cannot protect you: these are my hands.”⁶¹ In his lament he represents all the Kashmiri people who are grieved by the death and feel that it is unjust.

Ali has titled his book dealing with atrocities in Kashmir *The Country without a Post Office* to give a sense of a place where letters and information are barred. For example, the poem “Dear Shahid” could be a letter written by somebody to Ali, or Ali could be addressing it to an unknown addressee or writing an open letter—as he quotes from Elena Bonner's open letter to Boris Yeltsin in the epigraph—where everybody becomes the reader. In both cases Agha Shahid Ali is *shahid* (the Arabic equivalent of “witness”), bearing witness to the atrocities in Kashmir and sharing them with world.

J. L. Austin in 1950 introduced the term *performative utterance* as distinct from *constatives*, expressions describing a statement as true or false. Performative utterances are statements that in talking about an action enact it. As Austin says, “It seems clear that to utter the sentence (in, of course, the appropriate circumstances) is not to *describe* my doing of what I should be said in so uttering to be doing or to state that I am doing it: it is to do it.”⁶² There are many types of performative utterances. Derrida considers letter writing one of them and describes “[the] letter as performative written text, which anticipates, speaks to, and even ‘produce[s]’ its absent, ‘mute’ and ‘hollowed-out’ addressee.”⁶³

Thus when Ali says that one cannot talk about the conflict, he accomplishes the opposite. The letter becomes a performative utterance where he succeeds in disseminating information that is barred, as restrictions are such that “one can't even manage postage stamps.”⁶⁴ Likewise “The Floating Post Office” also deals with letters and post offices. Here the post office is a floating houseboat, an attractive carriage carrying terrifying messages of death and destruction, as the boat is “being rowed through the fog of death, the sentence passed on our city.”⁶⁵ The boat comes “close to reveal smudged black-ink letters”⁶⁶—an image of a bloodstained city, as in the next stanza we find “blood, blood shaken into letters.”⁶⁷ The

whole poem seeks to carry this message across waters, “the one open road”⁶⁸ that seems to be closing now. The struggle to row the boat continues until the end, when he feels that letters will reach the destination “through olive / canals, tense waters no one can close.”⁶⁹ In the last line he actually pledges to carry the burden of messages from this unknown conflict—a catastrophe deep in the mountainous region—and disseminate them to the world, and he succeeds.

Notes

1. Cohen, *Global Diasporas*, viii.
2. Kalra, Kaurand, and Hutnyk, *Diaspora and Hybridity*, 9.
3. Ali, *Veiled Suite*, 29.
4. Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, 10.
5. Ali, *Veiled Suite*, 29.
6. Ibid.
7. Ramazani, “Contemporary Postcolonial Poetry,” 602.
8. McLeod, *Beginning Postcolonialism*, 211.
9. Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, 9.
10. Ibid., 10.
11. Ramazani, “Contemporary Postcolonial Poetry,” 603.
12. Amato, *Rethinking Home*, 1.
13. Ali, *Veiled Suite*, 171.
14. Ibid., 172.
15. Khatoon, *Habba Khatoon*, 9.
16. Ali, *Veiled Suite*, 172.
17. The name of St. Petersburg was changed to Petrograd during the 1917 Russian Revolution in preference for a Russian rather than German name; it was later changed to Leningrad. It was changed back to St. Petersburg in 1991 after the fall of the Soviet Union.
18. Berman, *All That Is Solid*, 272.
19. Berten, *Literary Theory*, 48.
20. Ali, *Veiled Suite*, 171.
21. Dore, “Kashmir by Way of London,” 37.
22. Ali, *Veiled Suite*, 172.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid., 173.
25. Ibid., 174.
26. Berman, *All That Is Solid*, 270.
27. Schofield, *Kashmir in Conflict*, 1.
28. Ibid., 3.
29. Before the partition of India in 1947, Jammu and Kashmir was a princely state consisting of Kashmir, Jammu, Ladakh, Gilgit, and Balistan. After the 1947 war Pakistan occupied the northern areas of Gilgit and

- Balistan and a small part of northwest Kashmir now known as Azad Kashmir. India occupied the rest of Kashmir, Jammu, and Ladakh.
30. Bose, *Contested Lands*, 154.
 31. Schulz and Hammer, *Palestine Diaspora*, 15.
 32. Ali, *Veiled Suite*, 178.
 33. Ibid.
 34. Nayeem, interview.
 35. Ali, *Veiled Suite*, 179.
 36. Ibid.
 37. Ibid.
 38. Faheen, "Mosaic of Pain," 58.
 39. Stevens, "Snow Man."
 40. Ali, *Veiled Suite*, 178.
 41. Ibid., 178–80.
 42. Stevens, "Snow Man."
 43. Perkins, "On 'The Snow Man.'"
 44. Ali, *Veiled Suite*, 178.
 45. Perkins, "On 'The Snow Man.'"
 46. Chambers, "Last Saffron."
 47. Waheed, *Collaborator*, 298.
 48. Ali, *Veiled Suite*, 180.
 49. Ibid.
 50. Ibid.
 51. Ibid., 194. *Rizwan* in Arabic means "gatekeeper of heaven."
 52. Kashmir is known as paradise on earth because of its natural beauty. When Jahangir, a Mughal emperor, visited Kashmir for the first time he is said to have spoken the following Persian couplet by Amir Khusru in praise of the beauty of Kashmir (and Agha Shahid Ali has quoted the same in "The Last Saffron," *Veiled Suite*, 183): If there is a Paradise on earth, / It is this, it is this, it is this.
 53. Ali, *Veiled Suite*, 178.
 54. The Jammu and Kashmir state says that 219 Kashmiri Pandits were killed by the militants; however, some Pandit organizations cite figures up to 600. Moreover, about two hundred thousand to three hundred thousand Kashmiri Pandits were forced to leave the valley; most of them live in Jammu, and many live in Delhi and other Indian cities.
 55. Ali, *Veiled Suite*, 175.
 56. Ibid., 205.
 57. Ibid., 176.
 58. Ibid., 196.
 59. Ibid.
 60. On July 4, 1995, five Western tourists were kidnapped by the Kashmiri militant group Al-Faran. Ostro was beheaded and the rest were taken hostage and killed on December 13, 1995. However, the 2012 book *The Meadow: Kashmir, Where the Terror Began*, by two British journalists, Adrian Levy and Cathy Scott-Clark, reveals that the last four hostages were killed not by Al-Faran militants but by Indian intelligence agencies. The book explains that the Indian Army had them killed after they were freed by the

militants in exchange for payment. The blame was put on militants so as to defame Pakistan for its involvement in terrorism.

61. Ali, *Veiled Suite*, 236.
62. Qtd. in Royle, *Jacques Derrida*, 22.
63. Ibid., 32.
64. Ali, *Veiled Suite*, 194.
65. Ibid., 207.
66. Ibid.
67. Ibid.
68. Ibid.
69. Ibid., 208.

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FEROZ RATHER

Poet in Srinagar

One morning in the summer of 2002, as I began my stroll through Srinagar, I saw a military bunker. It was on the end of the wall fencing a post office. A makeshift structure of sandbags, the bunker was wrapped in whorls of wire from which hung bruising shards of broken liquor bottles. A soldier imprisoned inside, with only the white of his eyes visible, held a constant vigil. As a motif in the startlingly natural landscape of one of the most beautiful cities in the world, bunker is recurrent and unremarkable. There is no aesthetic that governs its construction, location, and number. One can find it in street corners, in the bends of the roads, within the markets and gardens, inside old, derelict houses or the defunct cinemas that only ghosts in Kashmir visit. But what struck me then was the oddity that the spectacle of the bunker hazarded, the sinister darkness and boredom in which the soldier seemed irredeemably cloaked. Across the wall of sand erected in destructive opposition, the flow of time had been reversed. Within, like in a Conrad story, time was languid, uninterrupted, and murderous; without, time was harried, precarious, a prelude to a funeral.

I resumed walking at my pace, thinking of my own surroundings. Behind me in the east stood the pale-green hills of Zabarvan. A bright sun shone above and the sky was tall and prosperous. The post office, facing the River Jhelum, was busy. People coming out walked along on the shore. I smiled, thrumming to their light footfalls.

I went inside Kashmir Book Depot around the corner and bought a copy of Agha Shahid Ali's *The Country without a Post Office*. When I came out, I saw my friend, Hilal. We collected our cups of tea from the roadside stall and stood near Hide-Out Café on Lambert Lane. Hilal had an air of incessant unease about him. He looked at me with his blue, unwinking eyes. He was silent and with his rugged, expressionless face, it was difficult to say whether he was lost in some sad reverie or whether he was scanning me. He was in his mid- or late twenties. Both his mother and father were school-teachers. He reported for *Greater Kashmir*. His monthly salary was

ten thousand rupees and he lodged cheaply in Raj Bagh, a rich neighborhood across the river. For many years, I'd known him as someone who would share notes with my older brother, Showkat, and toil away his nights to prepare for the civil service examinations. But so far, unlike Showkat, he had failed to become a bureaucrat. What endeared him to me were his literary ambitions, however mild they'd become since he'd left Aligarh Muslim University in 1998, where he studied English literature and, in the flames of passion that burn with a singular purity in the dawn of youth, thought of becoming a poet. It was him, as we sipped tea and watched the sun climb higher into the sky and lacquer the glass windows laden with gold necklaces, silver earrings, and rolls of silk fabric, who told me that Agha Shahid Ali's family lived not far away from his lodge. I'd the book of poems with me now but I was yet to read Shahid, whose death in December 2001 due to brain cancer in the United States had shot him to roaring fame. And Srinagar, waking to him posthumously, had had his books on loud display.

The first thing I did the next morning was go to see Shahid's family. The one-storied bungalow, Sufia Nishan, had a grassy garden with clumps of gardenias grown around the kekar tree pruned into an umbrella in the middle. I knocked at the door, coy and unsure to have come to this quiet house. The door was answered after an eternal wait of many minutes by an old man with wavy gray hair and a thick moustache. Shahid's father, Agha Ashraf Ali, was a senile, ninety-year-old man, Hilal had warned me. When I told Ashraf that I come from a village in Anantnag—forty miles south of the city—his face fell and his smile ceased. He slumped back into the sofa in the living room, crossing his wrinkled arms over his bulging belly. Even in his incoherence, he was conscious of his aristocratic pedigree. Showkat, who had listened to Ashraf's lectures as a graduate student in politics at Kashmir University, had told me that Ashraf's father, Agha Zafar Ali, had served as an administrator in the Dogra regime and his mother, Begum Zafar Ali, an educationist and legislator, was the first female matriculate of Kashmir. When Ashraf asked me about my origins, he was disappointed that I was neither an Agha nor a Syed; that I came from a family of peasants, where no one had taught me anything about Harold Bloom, the famous American critic who would later anthologize Shahid in *Till I End My Song: A Gathering of Last Poems*.

In the future, I continued my visits, and our conversation deepened. Ashraf began to ask me whether I'd want tea, whether I'd like

to have lunch with him. I think he was being convinced of my devotion to Bhaiya—he called his son by the nickname. His tone became sweet and welcoming and he opened up to me. From the very beginning, Bhaiya had an intense love for his mother, Sufia, Ashraf told me. Bhaiya loved to eat *rogan josh* as much as listening to the ghazals of Begum Akhtar. Bhaiya was fascinated with gardenias, more than any other kind of flower.

Shahid was born on February 4, 1949, in Delhi. He attended Presentation Convent High School in Srinagar and moved to Indiana in 1961, where Ashraf started a PhD in comparative education as a Fulbright fellow. Shahid did two years of high school there. When the family relocated to Srinagar, Shahid joined Sri Pratap College and studied history, philosophy, and English literature as an undergraduate. After graduating from college, Shahid applied to St. Stephens College in New Delhi, which refused to accept him. You should have seen how heartbroken Bhaiya was, Ashraf told me. He had to persuade Shahid to go to Hindu College, another prestigious college of Delhi University. Shahid completed his MA there with distinction and taught modern poetry for a few years before moving to America.

While Shahid chose a voluntary exile, things in Kashmir began to change dramatically. In 1987 the Indian government rigged the elections. Two years later, in the winter of 1989, Kashmir exploded with a full-scale armed uprising (Bose 1997, 45). This was the year I started going to school. Throughout those years of unthinkable violence, I remember how I longed to hear a voice that would articulate the story of Kashmir's horrors and brooding gloom that had settled after the brief burst of light at the beginning of the rebellion. The only piece of writing that somehow, at long last in high school, had spoken to me was "The Hangman at Home"

. . . Do they look at his
Hands when he reaches for the coffee
Or the ham and eggs? If the little
Ones say, Daddy, play horse, here's
A rope . . . (Sandburg 1922)

The soldiers would go back across the Himalayas to meet their families in Indian planes. Do the soldiers' children find their fathers' hands stained with blood as they hold them to kiss them? Carl Sandburg had made me ask. But the day after finding *The Country*

without a Post Office at Hilal's cramped, dimly lit, one-room lodge, a litter of scribbled papers and mounds of unwashed clothes lying about the floor, when I read Shahid, he struck me with a musical vehemence. Shahid, I thought, is the first poet writing in English who speaks eloquently about the thousands of Kashmiri men and women dead in the graves and the ones thrown away in hordes to rot in mass graves. The publication of *The Country without a Post Office* in 1997 thus shattered the long, asphyxiating silence. In the introduction of the book Shahid proclaims, "But the reports are true, and without song: mass rapes in the villages, towns left in cinders, neighborhoods torched. 'Power is hideous / like a barber's hands.' The rubble of downtown Srinagar stares at me from the Times" (Ali 2010, 173).

Rizwan, harrowed and harrowing, doesn't stop crying even after his death:

"Don't tell my father I have died," he says,
and I follow him through blood on the roads
and hundreds of pairs of shoes the mourners
left behind, as they ran from the funeral,
victims of firing. (Ali 2010, 178)

Earlier in his poem Ali writes about a boy, perhaps Rizwan, who's being interrogated by the soldiers, possibly within Papa 2, Srinagar's most dreaded torture center located at the foot of Zabarvan:

. . . by the Interrogation gates
so it can slip, unseen, into the cells:
Drippings from the suspended burning tire
are falling on the back of a prisoner,
the naked boy screaming, "I know nothing." (Ali 2010, 178)

One Friday in the summer of 2006 I traveled from my village to Srinagar to meet Basharat Peer. After an hour-long journey, when the cab dropped me in Lal Chowk, I began to think about my mother, whom I had seen early that morning. And there she was, sitting on a prayer rug in a corner in the kitchen, right in front of my eyes, as I stood in Lambert Lane sipping a cup of tea. Her scarf hiding her curly, pitch-black hair that refused to turn gray even at fifty-two, her face flushed, and her light eyes radiant with an almost supernatural light, her words rang through my head. "Mulke-ken gulan hend san, gatsch karne Khuda hifazat," she said in Koshur

(Along with the other blossoms of the country, let God be your guardian).

I crossed the River Jhelum in a leaf-shaped boat and past Sufia Nishan, a few blocks farther west, as Hilal had directed me, went to the house in Jawahar Nagar. The noon was bright. As I entered the gate into the untended lawn with many bald patches and beds of straggly marigolds, I found out that the house was slight. Beneath the rusted tin roof with uneven gables devoid of any rosaries left to dry there, the wilting walls had wooden windows peeling clots of white paint.

Peer called my name from the corridor and asked me to come inside and follow him upstairs. When I entered the room in the rear behind him, he sat on a chair in the corner, facing an empty wooden table on the end of which he'd placed his entire arsenal: a bag crammed with books of reportage and novels, and his computer. The computer was open and on the screen he kept looking at, sadly, expectantly, were the first four lines of the story he was working on. The room had a deep-red carpet and the curtains, half drawn and of dusty velvet, were hanging stiffly, as though pulled down by a dour weight—the smell of which I, in my mind, could not separate from the musty smell of forgotten office files. The walls too were painted in cold shades of ocher or gray and stood in a blazing contrast with the sunlit branches of a mulberry tree outside, visible in the half-open window, the bright leaves atremble in an impalpable breeze.

Peer was in a red golf t-shirt and blue jeans so faded that could have as well belonged to a carpenter. This cannot be his home, I thought, the moment I saw him. There is something deeply unnerving about living in a house that is assigned you or imposed upon you by others, an inauthenticity, a feeling of shallowness and evanescence when the walls surrounding you do not in any way recognize you, when the walls do not affirm or reproduce your deepest beliefs and convictions. Peer was singled out, unique in his nervous glory. I was yet to read his writings, but I could feel the force of his personality. Before the house could reject him, he had reclaimed his place in the home he carried around with him on his back—the book bag and the computer. Though it was intolerably hot in Delhi, he told me, he longed to go back to his solitary apartment there. He wanted to be alone so that he could immerse himself in the story and beat the deadline. I had briefly visited his apartment during the last winter and he had been generous to recognize

my desire to write. He had given me books and a long list of other books. Now, looking at me, someone who participated with true zeal in the seditious dream of becoming a writer in a country where, despite an ongoing, bloody rebellion, almost every father wanted his son or daughter to be a slavish servant of the government—even becoming a clerk would do—he was overjoyed. He pushed back the sleek hair coming into his face with the back of his hand and his limpid eyes shone. He threw himself up from the chair and stood by the window. He took a pack of cigarettes and a matchbox from his pants pocket and lit one. Then he dug out a Conrad from the bottom of the bag with his other hand and gave it to me. Read this, he said emphatically, till I come back. He disappeared to the kitchen downstairs. When he returned, cheerful and smiling, with steaming cups of tea on a tray he held with both his hands, I mentioned Shahid. He scolded me about how boys and girls of my age didn't read enough when Kashmir was crying and bleeding to be written. An expression of deep disappointment overcame his face, and his mouth quivered and shut. It seemed that anyone close to him who did not apply himself to reading and writing wholeheartedly was seriously violating him and, sooner or later, he was going to break away from them.

Peer found his inspiration to write the first line of what would become Kashmir's first memoir, *Curfewed Night*, in "The Last Saffron," a poem in *The Country without a Post Office*. "I was born in winter in Kashmir," he had told me in Delhi, was a variation of "I'll die, in autumn, in Kashmir." When he had read "Dear Shahid" for the first time in 2002, upon coming to the doctor's account in the Hide-Out Café, he had to fight back his tears (Ali 2010, 194). Now, as we recited the lines together—"I want to ask the fortune-tellers: Did anything in his line of Fate reveal that the webs of his hands would be cut with a knife?"—tears came into his eyes again and a silence fell in the room. A beam of sunlight was bending about the edge of the curtain and formed into a strip of liquid light near his feet. Then a flock of squeamish sparrows landed on the branches, and we heard the *azan*. As the muezzin went on wailing and the sparrows twittered, Peer spoke again, together their voices rupturing the silence.

Peer told me the story of Shafi, a boy from Maisum—a poor neighborhood near Lal Chowk—about whom he'd written in *Curfewed Night*. Shafi suffered wild beatings in Papa 2 and was routinely exposed to the glaring bulbs in the "hell" (Peer 2010, 132). He lost

almost all his power to see. In a small, dark room, Shafi was made to live like cattle with other twenty men. Inside the whitewashed walls blemished with blood, he slept on the bare floor, defecated and urinated in polythene bags, and cursed himself, all the while longing for death as he failed to sleep in the lice-infested blankets.

The Country without a Post Office casts a retrospective glance at the history of Kashmir. The book briefly traces the tyrannies of foreigners—the Mughals, the Afghans, the Sikhs, and the Dogras who delayed, obscured, confused, and destroyed the realization of Kashmir's dreams of nationhood during their respective reigns. With the continuous denial of a political choice, however, Kashmir's desire to be sovereign is neither weakened nor made facile:

. . . It is pain
from which love departs into all new pain:
Freedom's terrible thirst, flooding Kashmir,
is bringing love to its tormented glass. (Ali 2010, 239)

Employing many different poetic forms, like the free verse, ghazal, epistolary prose poem, and villanelle, with an exceptional technical precision, *The Country without a Post-office* is a testament to 1990s Kashmir. In "After the August Wedding/In Lahore, Pakistan," the arrogance of the Indian state is addressed as:

A brigadier says,
The boys of Kashmir
break so quickly, we make their bodies sing,
on the rack, till no song is left to sing. (Ali 2010, 241)

The Country has a distinctive Urdu flavor, and the influence of Mirza Ghalib is very evident. Shahid inherits this legacy from his *matamaal*, or mother's home, for Sufia Nomani was from Lucknow, the most exalted station of court poetry after Delhi in the late Mughal period. Though Ghalib (1797–1869) was born in Agra and lived most of his life in Delhi, along with Mir Taqi Mir and Altaf Hussain Hali—the latter was the only disciple Ghalib deigned to adopt—he exercised a swaying influence on all the surrounding schools of Urdu and Persian poetry. Though Shahid had become increasingly conscious of his Kashmiri identity and the future of his people toward the end of his life, he bemoaned the lost grandeur of the Indian Muslims. In *The Half-Inch Himalayas* (1987), while he's

succinct about the geographical distinction of Kashmir from India, he dwells upon the end of the Mughal era and the overthrow of Muslims in India that Ghalib had mourned over after the Mutiny of 1857:

Now every English soldier that bears arms
Is sovereign, and free to work his will . . .
The city is athirst for Muslim blood
And every grain of dust must drink its fill. (Russell 1972, 20)

After 1857 the British took direct control of Delhi, and the last Mughal king, Bahadur Shah Zafar, another fine poet, “was exiled to Burma, buried in Rangoon” (Ali 2010, 50). Shahid goes back in time to the splendor of the Mughals and breathes in it like an insider:

I step out into Chandini Chowk, a street once
strewn with jasmine flowers
for the Empress and the royal women
who bought perfumes from Isfahan,
fabrics from Dacca, essence from Kabul,
glass bangles from Agra. (Ali 2010, 50)

Suddenly, then, he pulls us back to the post-Partition India of the 1980s:

Beggars now live here in tombs
Of unknown nobles and forgotten saints
While hawkers sell combs and mirrors
Outside a Sikh temple. (Ali 2010, 50)

In his memoir *Istanbul: Memories and the City*, Orhan Pamuk evokes a similar melancholy, or *huzun*, pervading the streets of Istanbul, the city built on the ruins of the Ottoman Empire. Though *huzun* is a comprehensive communal feeling with mystical, religious, and cultural dimensions, Pamuk seems to be at the utmost odds when he talks about the historical aspect of *huzun*. “The city into which I was born,” he writes, “was poorer, shabbier, and more isolated than it had ever been before in its two-thousand-year history” (2006, 6, 90). For Pamuk, Istanbul has always been filled with “the end-of-empire melancholy,” and like all Istanbulis he has spent his entire life either battling with this melancholy or making it his own.

When I was a graduate student in Delhi I lived in Okhla, a Muslim ghetto fed by the stagnant waters of the River Jamuna, on the eastern fringe of the city. It was a time—from 2006 to 2008—when the city was stirred with the new waves of commerce set in motion by the liberalization of the 1990s. The air in my street, however, was too fetid, the loss too evident. I resisted the nostalgia that permeated the neighborhood and the minds of its denuded inhabitants. The feeling was so infectious that it wrecked the daily business of the prominent Muslim schools like Jamia Millia Islamia where, at the time, I was enrolled as a student of English literature. I too was tempted but I did not participate in Pamuk's or Ghalib's melancholy. I had no wish to bewail a deceased empire or nation because I had had none. Away from Kashmir, I longed only for Kashmir. In my quiet, windowless room, the hours of solitude passed in an inward resignation and torpor, until one rainy August afternoon when the power went out, I remembered remembering my mother in Srinagar, and the countless images of the faces of my dead killed during the war began to whirl into a giddy storm through my head. I closed my eyes in the damp darkness, my mother's words assuming a heightened poignancy and power, shattering the silence around me.

When I stepped outside, I saw men and women in rags, slight, drooping, passing by in despair, while the stray dogs lazed about and the clouds of mosquitoes hovered over the drains stinking with garbage and shit. If they bite me, I thought, I would die of dengue or malaria, alone and away from home. I retreated into my room. I lit a candle. I recited "Prayer Rug" and reclaimed Shahid in the "rosaries of ginger / of rustling peppers" my mother prepared every autumn and hung from the nails drawn into the windows and the symmetrical gables of our house (Ali 2010, 40).

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DUR E AZIZ AMNA

Requiem

Agha Shahid Ali's Last Canzone

In "Lenox Hill," the haunting elegy that he gilded out of mourning, memory, and myth, Shahid grappled with the death of his mother and the unfairness of a universe that had wrenched her apart from him. "I prayed: If she must die / let it only be some dream." The jagged edges of his grief hugged every verse and every thought: the poem was filled with tender, helpless indignation. "Thus I swear, here and now, not to forgive / the universe / that would let me get used to a universe / without you." Later, when Shahid began writing another canzone after being diagnosed with the same illness that had stolen his mother from him, he eschewed this anger in favor of a much more calculated and polished negotiation with his own mortality.

"The Veiled Suite" is Agha Shahid Ali's final requiem for himself, and death clings to its every measured word and calibrated rhythm. At the time Shahid was battling with terminal cancer, his body the frailest it had ever been. Even among an oeuvre of verse admired for its nuanced subject matter, tapestry upon tapestry of allusions, and what Amitav Ghosh calls an unashamed "bardic register," "The Veiled Suite" stands out for some of the most enigmatic and complex verses Shahid ever wrote. Following the tight structure prescribed by the Italian canzone, the sixty-five verses follow a rhyme that winds a tight circle around five keywords, *veil*, *eyes*, *night*, *see*, and *sense*. Five of the six stanzas circumambulate around one keyword each, with the other four end rhymes interspersed less frequently. In the envoi, all five appear together to complete the labyrinthine pattern of rhyme that has been weaved throughout.

More so than the technical precision of the poem, however, it is its cold, pragmatic, almost aloof conversation with death and mortality that sets "The Veiled Suite" as a poem apart. The faceless stranger in the poem is death itself, as it comes seeking its victim from behind the thin veil separating the two. Death can represent

“only two alternatives”: either it is a malignant agent, wishing to cause harm to the poet, or it is simply a tool in God’s hands that will “unknowingly harm [him] anyway.” The epigraph to “The Veiled Suite,” which says as much, shows that the poem begins with a calm acceptance of mortality that was absent in “Lenox Hill.”

Menace lingers in many crooks of the poem. The faceless stranger, be it death, the cancer gnawing away at the poet’s life, or perhaps even the tormenting memory of a lover, is a sexy, exotic construct. “Where isn’t he from? He’s brought sky from Vail, / Colorado, and the Ganges from Varanasi / in a clay urn.” There is an everlasting mystery surrounding the identity, history, and appearance of this stranger. “What will be revealed? What stunning color sense / kept hidden so long in his eyes.” What remains unambiguous, however, is his motive. His intent to harm and destroy the poet is never in doubt. The last stanza, in fact, shows the poet acquiescing to this intent. “I am to hand you a knife from behind the veil,” he predicts, implying that in this confrontation with mortality, he himself is supposed to cooperate fully. Death is expecting a peaceful surrender.

Yet, in an act of duality characteristic of a poet who once wrote, “You were exiled by exiles,” Shahid depicts death not only as the beloved stranger behind the veil but also as the veil itself. The veil is a metaphor for the last remaining barrier between the lover and the Beloved. The first stanza begins with an imperious pronouncement by the mysterious stranger, “No mortal has or will ever lift my veil.” Borrowing from Islamic mythology, a frequent inspiration in his poetry, Shahid’s faceless stranger is the Beloved, impressing upon him that it is only through death that the poet might finally gain a sight of him.

Mirroring the tradition in Urdu and Persian poetry wherein the lines separating human and divine love blur, the Beloved here also symbolizes God. Islamic history has remained captivated by the concept of the veil for centuries, and the conception of God as an entity forever veiled from the mortal eye is intrinsic to mainstream Islamic thought. Veils were put in place between God and humans after Adam and Eve’s disobedience, and they remain there to this day, filming the gaze of mortals as they look outward in their search for God.

Shahid must also have had in mind the story of Moses as detailed in the Quran. Atop Mount Sinai in Egypt, Moses pleaded to God, “Show me [Yourself] so that I may look at you.” In “The Veiled

Suite” Shahid mirrors the desire of Moses, the ambition of every mortal, to look beyond the vast divide and recognize the Divine. In the Quranic tale, God acquiesces, knowing well that a sight of Him would be far too much for Moses to bear. He shows the slightest fragment of Himself and “renders (Mount Sinai) level. . . . Moses falls unconscious.” Like Moses’s God, the “random assassin” also shows a willingness to let the poet endanger himself in his desire to lift the veil. “He can kill me without license,” Shahid acknowledges.

More than the stories of the Quran and others that form part of orthodox Islamic thought, Shahid was interested in the many esoteric rivulets of the religion. His wonderfully wrought poem “A Secular Comedy” spins into charming verse the Sufi narrative that Satan and God were, in fact, lovers. Similarly, “The Veiled Suite” employs the concept of the veil as understood by Sufi thought. According to Sufi tradition *muraqaba*, or meditation, can lead the believer to a state where all veils between her and God, the Beloved, vanish. The lover can get much closer to God than is believed by orthodox Islam, but only through a complete annihilation of the self. And so, while the poet pleads to the stranger behind the veil to eschew the last barrier between them, he is inviting his own destruction in the process. The union with the Beloved will necessitate a loss of self; the stranger will “unknowingly harm [the poet] anyway.”

The hundreds of laboriously annotated drafts preserved in Hamilton College’s archives on the poet, which Shahid wrote before he considered the poem complete, attest to the fact that he had lofty ambitions for his final canzone. He wished for it not only to document his personal encounter with illness and mortality but also to be a saturated essence of his entire oeuvre. As his final masterpiece, the poem seeks to evoke themes that have been present in many verses that preceded it. And what might these themes be? In his essay “Agha Shahid Ali’s Tricultural Nostalgia,” Bruce King very aptly asserts that Shahid used poetry to “recall what has been lost in the process of living.” Shahid’s career as a poet saw him experiment with many different forms and registers, every new collection of poetry bearing its own signature style. However, he always remained captivated by the cartography of loss, how it happens, what it does to the human mind, and whether or not it can be undone. In “Postcard from Kashmir,” Shahid recounts the loss of homeland by evoking the tender image of the “half-inch Himalayas,” a place that used to be home, now shrinking even within memory. In “Snow on the Desert,” he universalizes grief when he commemorates the “dried seas the earth had lost, their

forsaken shores.” In the poems that inhabit *Rooms Are Never Finished* this consciousness of loss is more acute than ever. Shahid’s grief, caused by the death of his mother, is woven in with Zainab’s pleas, ringing across history as part of the age-old story of Karbala. Finally, in “The Veiled Suite” Shahid pays a final ode to loss by emphasizing how all-encompassing it is. Behind the veil lies buried the loss of centuries, Vail and Varanasi blending together, mother and lover becoming one, the blood of Husain and the ultramarine colors of the now-muddied River Jhelum coalescing. Everywhere is bereavement. As Faiz Ahmed Faiz put it, in the translated words of Shahid, we are in “desolation’s desert.”

If there remains any consolation, it is in the act of describing loss itself. Faiz wrote that the documentation of grief was “an act of compassion in our forlorn times.” In “The Veiled Suite” Shahid seeks to alleviate loss by adorning it in lacquer and trimming it to fit spectacularly disciplined verses that pay tribute to literature across the years. Faiz lingers, as always. Along with Islamic mythology, Plath is also evoked, in the verse “The moon for its ivory scours the night.” Most significantly, however, the second stanza contains an achingly powerful reference to his beloved Dickinson, who reminds Shahid that “his heart measures like the sea.” And indeed, what we remember most fondly of the poet is the magnanimity and depth of his verse, which, like his heart, measures like the sea, its banks lined with the silt of so many other shores, its waves echoing not only his own grief but that of the whole universe.

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MIHAELA MOSCALIUC

Palimpsestic Intertextualities in “A Lost Memory of Delhi” and “The Last Saffron”

I have come to anticipate students' initial response to Agha Shahid Ali's work as they attempt to navigate rich webs in intertextuality, shifting geographies, and the pull of synchronic and diachronic histories that place them, within a few pages, in the underworlds of Greek myth, World War II concentration camps, Native American reservations, the Kashmir Valley, Ohio highways that “exit” to Calcutta, New York subways, or Golgotha. The more sophisticated students recognize threads of Apollinaire, Dickinson, Plath, Shakespeare, Milton, George Trakl, James Wright, Melville, Rushdie, Borges, the Koran, Hafiz, or other Western and non-Western writers whose voices are interwoven in the fabric of Ali's work.

“Disoriented,” most students conclude when asked to describe this first encounter with Ali's poems. “That's perfect,” I assure them, compounding their confusion but letting them know that they stand, momentarily, on fertile ground. To feel disoriented is to experience, firsthand, some of the dislocation, decenteredness, displacement, and emplacement at the heart of the poems, the nonlinear histories, the intersecting or sparring cultures, and the fluidity of composite voices. This disorientation provides access to the fabric of various transnational, transcultural, hybrid, or ethno-global experiences and the poetics that capture and craft them. “There is the Muslim in me, there is the Hindu in me, there is the Western in me,” Ali declared in an interview, and, as he suggested on a number of occasions, he saw his work as a reflection of the “various permutations of these cultures” and as the product of various historical forces and literary traditions.¹ As a locus of interchange and negotiation, his space of articulation builds on, and simultaneously challenges, those traditional models of ethnic expression that commodify difference. Ali writes out of various subject positions and from within shifting geographies, often within the same poem. His

speakers embody movement even when firmly grounded on American soil; they are immigrants, exiles, transnationals, literal and figurative border crossers. Perhaps Ali's multivocality illustrates what Homi Bhabha has in mind when he argues that "the representation of difference must not be hastily read as the reflection of pre-given ethnic or cultural traits set in the fixed tablet of tradition" but rather as "a complex, on-going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation."²

I use the notions of the palimpsest and palimpsestic writing as extensions to Bhabha's thinking on how to legitimize alterity. I see the palimpsest as a particularly apt metaphor for the narrativization of transnational, hybrid, and other types of "de-centered" identities. It privileges issues of fluidity and interconnectivity, acknowledges the historicity of experience, and draws attention to the politics of erasure, to the overwritten and the underwritten. One strategy that lends palimpsestic qualities to Ali's work is his particular use or appropriation of other writers' work, as discussed in Dwayne Betts's essay "Borrowed Words: The Use of Quotations and Italics in the Ghazals of Agha Shahid Ali," included in this collection. Betts draws attention to Ali's art of "craft[ing] something wholly new from the shreds of language, of culture, of myths, and of histories that worked their way into his thinking in a singular fashion" and reads this as integral to the poet's "quest for reconciliation"—the reconciliation of the self with the world. As Betts points out, in incorporating others' voices in his ghazals, Ali "invites multiple frames, as if the veil of exile has broadened the view from which he understands the world." This evidences a commitment not just "to the multiplicity of meanings, but also . . . to the multiplicity of sources of understanding."

In an interview in the *Massachusetts Review*, Ali nodded to the modernists for teaching him the art of literary appropriation: "I did learn this whole business of how to incorporate allusions and quotations into the fabric of your poetry, how you do it and make it your own, and how sometimes to quote something and not even acknowledge it." According to Ali, it's all about being serious about poetry, serious enough to be able to recognize the sources. "Some of the pleasure," he reminds us, "is in recognizing."³ It is in this act of recognition that we can experience poetry most intimately and most responsibly. The poet's task, Ali intimates, is to keep weaving "God's tapestry" ("I Dream I Am at the Ghat of the Only World"⁴); the readers' task is to identify its colors and tex-

tures, to understand how the singularity of each thread enhances the singularity of the whole.

Contemporary debates on intellectual property, copyright infringements, and the plagiarism plaguing academia might make Americans flinch at Ali's remark about giving himself permission to appropriate without acknowledgement. Despite recent scholarship that suggests that the Romantics were just as interested in textual assimilation and borrowings as they were in self-legislating originality (see Tilar J. Mazzeo's 2006 *Plagiarism and Literary Property in the Romantic Period*), we continue to take arguments about the overlap of originality and "true" authorship at face value and to use the myth of Romantic authorship as the standard paradigm for assessing our own and others' writing. Ali's strategies of assimilation and appropriation counter (and in the process interrogate) Western ideologies on the ownership of texts that privilege individualism and claim that, as an autogenous entity, the poet is the sole creator and generator of the work. Such perspectives discard non-Western traditions that emphasize collective and collaborative creativity and rule that any unacknowledged borrowings (aka plagiarism) are reprehensible violations of the author's rights. Ali's comments and poems posit that just as we are the products of historical forces and circumstances over which we have limited control, so is the work we produce. Writing does not happen in a void but within histories regulated by asymmetrical power relations and often, as in Ali's case, at the intersection of dissimilar and often conflicting cultures and traditions. Ali may be said to share Barthes's belief that "A text is . . . a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations. . . . The writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. His only power is to mix writings, to counter the one with the others, in such a way as never to rest on any one of them."⁵

Ali's use of palimpsestic intertextuality speaks to the idea that originality is a cliché and that poetry committed to newness alone fails not only the test of time but also the community to which it speaks, toward which it reaches. Two poems that illustrate Ali's discreet use of palimpsestic intertextuality are "A Lost Memory of Delhi" (*The Half-Inch Himalayas*, 1987) and "The Last Saffron" (*The Country without a Post Office*, 1997). Here Ali conjures, intercepts, and communes with similar poems by other poets; though not acknowledged, these other poems form a "vertical axis"⁶ or palimpsest for Ali's poems. The very notion of the palimpsest fore-

grounds the idea that all writing occurs in the presence of other texts, that all texts are both original works and acts of recreation—a latticework of crosshatching and crosspollination. In poststructuralist jargon, as we write we are also written by and written through the poems/the language of others. That may be what Ali's speaker has in mind when he says, in section 4 of "In Search of Evanescence," "Someone wants me live / so he can learn // those prayers, that language . . . He wants me to live // and as I speak he is freezing / my words he will melt them / years later // to listen and listen / to the water of my voice // when he is the last speaker of his language."⁷

The first line of Ali's "The Last Saffron" ("I will die, in autumn, in Kashmir") echoes the first line of Peruvian expatriate Cesar Vallejo's in "Black Stone Lying on a White Stone" ("I will die in Paris, on a rainy day"), Greek poet Kostas Ouránis's "I shall die one day on a mournful autumn twilight / in my cold room where I have lived alone" (in "I Shall Die One Day on a Mournful Autumn Twilight"), Henry Spiess's "I will die on a peaceful, rainy day" (in "I will die . . ."),⁸ and American poet Donald Justice's "I will die in Miami in the sun" (in "Variations on a Text by Vallejo"). In all four "premature" elegies the poets envisage their demise and ponder the imagined circumstances of their own death, in tones that span lament and self-directed irony. Ali's speaker places his death in Kashmir, a paradise that, though irrevocably spoiled, is the only imaginable paradise as point of return, as the ending couplet, borrowed from the Persian poet Amir Khusran, suggests: "If there is a paradise on earth, / It is this, it is this, it is this."⁹ Ali's auto-elegy recasts myths, collages poetic forms, and parallels the fragmentation of a personal narrative (his) to that of Kashmir, a homeland devastated by political conflict and corruption, a womb turned tomb not by the natural order of things but by greed and fear. His return to the homeland takes the shape of a descent into a man-made hell; at the same time, he entrusts his life to "the keeper of the world's last saffron" who rows him "on an island the size of a grave" "into the sunset, / past all pain."¹⁰

In this poem, as in "A Lost Memory of Delhi," the intertextual frame powers connections to other modes of anticipating, grappling with, and grieving one's death. Thus, though Ouránis's humor and Justice's and Vallejo's ironies are not referenced directly in "The Last Saffron," they become part of the texture of Ali's poem. They share the "skin"/parchment onto which they etch or ink their narratives.

Each auto-elegy (including those “variations” I am not aware of) may be seen as a version of Foucault’s “node within a network,”¹¹ the nexus of an interplay of originality and imitation, continuity and simultaneity, individual and collective consciousness. When Ali’s speaker “remembers” the day he’ll die (“long ago,” he assures us), this act of projected remembering brings into its folds the other elegies, their speakers, and a topology of dying that spans continents and cultures. In a later poem, “In” (from the posthumous *Call Me Ishmael Tonight*), he writes, “I see the rooms, all the rooms, I am to die in” (*Veiled Suite* 360). These are the rooms in which dying takes place—his, others’, his as others’, his as the transnational’s with more than one home and more than one way of passing on, passing through, expiring.

In “A Lost Memory of Delhi” the speaker ghosts back in time to the Delhi of 1948, on the day of his inception. He follows his newlywed parents to the door of their house. All he wants is “to tell them I am their son / older much older than they are,” but his knocking, louder than the stars’ “tongues of glass,” remains unanswered. The poem is a perfect companion to Sharon Olds’s “I Go Back to May 1937” and Donald Hall’s “In the Kitchen of the Old House,” which it parallels thematically and structurally. Unlike his fellow poets, however, Ali does not reconstruct the moment of creation in order to swerve its course or attempt its undoing. The silence is not burdened with knowledge about the future and its irreversibility, as in the Olds and Hall pieces; if anything, it is the impossibility of a real return to the place of creation—that house “always faded in photographs,” the road “without name,” the Delhi of 1948—that informs Ali’s sense of loss. The memory of Delhi (“this city that lasts / like blood on the bitten tongue”)¹² is “lost” because the speaker has no access to the Delhi into which he was born. No matter how daring the imagination, it cannot reconstitute what’s been wrecked by history. As Olds’s piece concludes, “we can’t undo or redo the past, but we can ‘tell about it.’” The sense of helplessness we witness in Ali’s speaker differs from and supplements the one experienced by Olds’s or Hall’s speakers; the poems echo, append, or (re)write one another into a collaborative palimpsest.

In their use of intertextuality, “A Lost Memory of Delhi” and “The Last Saffron” situate the singularity of Ali’s experiences within a transnational, transcultural, and transgenerational community of writers who share similar concerns. This community is particularly important in the context of the poems’ subject matter: One poem

imagines his conception and the other his death, with the *lost* and *last* of the titles presaging the poems' melancholy thrusts. Chronologically, both poems are set outside the speaker's life span and thus beyond the limits of personal control. There is no other way to intervene in one's conception or death, these pieces seem to suggest, except by refashioning the events in our imagination, by gifting them our prosodies and dictions. Such pivotal events (creation, death) need a community that can celebrate and mourn and that can bear witness to oneself and others. Through their analogous poems, Sharon Olds, Donald Hall, César Vallejo, Kóstas Ouránis, and Donald Justice constitute that community. As Ali suggests in "Return to Harmony 3," this community is an extension of family and of the "house" that holds the speaker and his cry: "On my shelf, by Ritsos and Rilke and Cavafy and Lorca and Iqbal and Amichai and Paz, my parents are beautiful in their wedding brocades, so startlingly young! . . . And there in black and white my mother, eighteen years old, a year before she came a bride to these Harmonies, so unforgivingly poor and so unforgivingly beautiful that the house begins to shake in my arms, and when the unarmed world is still again, with pity, it is the house that is holding me in its arms and the cry coming faded from its empty rooms is my cry."¹³

Ali's allusions and appropriations create a narrative of referentiality that resembles a palimpsest whose layers might be invisible, but not lost, and whose hybrid voice reveals the inherent richness of positing self and others as one.

Notes

1. Agha Shahid Ali, "'Agha Shahid Ali: Calligraphy of Coils,' Interview with Rehan Ansari and Rajinderpal S. Pal," *Himalmag* (March 1998). <http://old.himalmag.com/component/content/article/2385--agha-shahid-ali-calligraphy-of-coils.html>
2. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994, 2.
3. Agha Shahid Ali, "Interview with Christine Benvenuto," *Massachusetts Review* 43:2 (2009): 266.
4. Agha Shahid Ali, *The Veiled Suite: The Collected Poems*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2009, 319.
5. Ronald Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*. London: Fontana, 1977, 146.
6. Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*. New York: Columbia UP, 1980, 69.
7. Agha Shahid Ali, *The Veiled Suite*, 126.
8. In "Exhuming Vallejo," *Poetry* (Nov. 2014), Geoffrey Brock argues that

Spieess's poem might have served as inspiration for Vallejo's.

9. Agha Shahid Ali, *The Veiled Suite*, 183.

10. Ibid., 181.

11. Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. London: Tavistock, 1974, 23.

12. Agha Shahid Ali, "Chandi Chowk, Delhi." *The Veiled Suite*, 126.

13. Agha Shahid Ali, *The Veiled Suite*, 201.

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Borrowed Words

The Use of Quotations and Italics in the Ghazals of Agha Shahid Ali

I first read Agha Shahid Ali in prison. This is to say that I had been disappeared, removed so far from the people who might love me that a post office was their only means of keeping in touch. But at least I had that. The poetry of Agha Shahid Ali channels those who have been constricted, restrained, not allowed to speak for themselves: "I must go back briefly to a place I have loved / to tell you those you will efface I have loved."¹ His work calls us back to that experience, especially now, as bombs explode in Palestine and Israel, in Jammu and Kashmir, Somalia and Afghanistan, Yemen and Pakistan. *Refugee* and *exile* have returned to our daily lexicon as death has begun, again, to stalk our borders. In the wake of that, Shahid's work reminds us that "the birthplace of written language is bombed to nothing. / How neat, dear America, is this game for you?"² This is still the question of today, and we return to Shahid's poetry for the questions that escape us.

In their foreword to *Call Me Ishmael Tonight*, Agha Iqbal Ali and Hena Zafar Ahmad discuss Shahid's use of the words of fellow poets as a way to salute the craft of "those whom he knew and loved."³ While true, Shahid's borrowing of words is even more complex—it is rhetorical, an inventive way to add breadth and depth to a form that already steadfastly resists narrative. In "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower," William Carlos Williams writes, "it is difficult / to get the news from poems / yet men die miserably everyday / for the lack / of what is found there."⁴ Call Shahid's poetry an exception to the rule: in *Call Me Ishmael Tonight* readers find that juncture where the news meets that thing that women and men die miserably for the lack of—and more than mere homage, the words of others are integral to this moment.

The final couplet of "In Arabic" creates the tone for what follows in *Call Me Ishmael*. The call and response that ends "In Arabic"

also captures the texture of what follows: “they ask me to tell them what Shahid means” followed by the response, “Listen: it means ‘The Beloved’ in Persian, ‘witness’ in Arabic.”⁵ The couplet on its surface contains multitudes: the “they” that pose the question, the two languages from which Shahid gets his answer, and the third by which he expresses it all. Shahid invites multiple frames, as if the veil of exile has broadened the view from which he understands the world. This is not just a commitment to the multiplicity of meanings but also a commitment to the multiplicity of sources of understanding. I would argue that in consciously making this an element of his practice of the ghazal, Shahid has highlighted, if not invented, another rhetorical strategy that widens our understanding. This is not just allusion but a layering that is absent in poetry obsessively engaged with the self.

The tapestry of voices woven into *Call Me Ishmael Tonight* argue that there is news in verse because verse can be obsessed with, even at its most intimate, the acknowledging and layering of voices usually silenced, voices that in his verse call out to the world about the world. In “I Have Loved” Shahid writes, “I must go back briefly to a place I have loved / to tell you those you will efface I have loved.”⁶ This single-couplet ghazal that opens *Ishmael*, a ghazal that consciously breaks the strict formality of the ghazal, informs the reader that what Shahid writes comes from a place where the lines of demarcation between the political and the personal have been abandoned. In this way, his ghazals become places where he reacquaints himself and his reader with all that it means to be alive in this world.

Agha Shahid Ali created worlds in his poetry in part because he invested worlds into his poems. Call him a poet of exile and you almost miss the point, unless you recognize that the gift of exile is a quest for reconciliation. The quest, in some ways, always fails. In “Land” Shahid writes, “If home is found on both sides of the globe, / home is of course here—and always a missed land.”⁷ You know your home is not your home and you know your adopted home is not your home and so you cling tenaciously to both. Ali has written, “Will you, beloved stranger, ever witness Shahid / two destinies at last reconciled by exiles?”⁸ For me, the reader has always been the “you” and the speaker, both witnessing and experiencing what exile has wrought.

The question, of course, is if one cannot reconcile the self with the world, then what does one do? *Call Me Ishmael Tonight* wrestles with this conundrum. In “May 24, 1980” Joseph Brodsky writes of

his home, “Quit the country that bore and nursed me. / Those who forgot me would make a city.”⁹ For Brodsky, like Ali and many other writers who have found themselves distanced from their home, the experience is defining. Yet for Agha Shahid Ali exile is both complication and gift. Because ultimately, if there is a gift in exile, it is that one is often bound to hold fast to multiple tongues in a way that a person who is never forced away from their native land is not. In ways that even the immigrant, who may or may not discard his tongue and history for that of his adopted home, may not. Shahid deploys the double vision of an exile to craft something wholly new from the shreds of language, of culture, of myths, and of histories that worked their way into his thinking in a singular fashion: that new thing, in abandoning nothing of what has passed, creates a present vibrant with sorrow and possibility.

The thing is, you can’t narrow the ghazal. It expands and contracts, pushes away from narrative until the poem distills into moments. In the hands of Shahid, those moments, individual pearls on a necklace held in the hands of someone beautiful, invite us to live in as many as a dozen different epiphanies in a single poem. It’s not particularly easy narrowing down what the ghazal does, in part because the poems do so much. But the graceful threading of all the disparate pieces we build our lives from is the thing that is rarely replicated elsewhere, if ever.

In “Of Light,” a poem for Galway Kinnell, Shahid uses lines from three of Kinnell’s poems: “Goodbye,” “The Burn,” and “Poem of Night.”¹⁰ These lines are more than homage to Kinnell. Already using a form that resists narratives, by bringing the voice of Kinnell into “Of Light,” Shahid invests the mood and tone of Kinnell into his poem. The lines are a reminder of echo of their natural context, while also adding to the elegiac moment in Shahid’s poem. Each of the lines adds something distinct to “Of Light,” three different turns that bring emotional depth, broaden the range of relationships covered by the poem, and add an unexpected level of juxtaposition that collapses the distance between public and personal mourning.

The ghazal resists narrative but establishes embraces tone—even if only as a point of departure. “Of Light” begins, “At dawn you leave. The river wears its skin of light. / And I trace love’s loss to the origin of light.”¹¹ This is mourning. But is it mourning for familial love? Erotic? The question lingers. For an answer, Shahid adeptly echoes Kinnell’s haunting elegy “Goodbye” with his second couplet. The final two lines of Kinnell’s poem read, “I swallow down

the goodbyes I won't get to use, / tasteless, with wretched mouth-water, whatever we are, she and I, we're nearly cured."¹² In the hands of a different poet, the use of that first pained line would derail whatever follows, trap the writer in the shadow of Kinnell. However, by using the line, Shahid pushes it, transforms it by introducing an unnamed "she" that reminds the readers who know of Kinnell's late mother, but for other readers is simply a woman who is lost. Shahid writes, "I swallow down the goodbyes I won't get to use." / At grief's speed she waves from a palanquin of light."¹³ This couplet is both a framing of the Kinnell poem and something altogether distinct.

In the tenth couplet of "Of Light" Shahid borrows a line from Kinnell's "Poem of Night." "A cheekbone, / a curved piece of brow, / A pale eyelid . . . / And the dark eye I make out with all within of light."¹⁴ Here Shahid turns the third section of Kinnell's "Poem of Night" into a pearl in his ghazal:

A cheekbone,
A curved piece of brow,
A pale eyelid
Float in the dark,
And now I make out
An eye, dark,
Wormed with far-off, unaccountable lights.¹⁵

Kinnell's dark eye becomes more mysterious in the frame of the ghazal. The far-off, unaccountable lights become something known in a way that really isn't discernible: with all within of light. This couplet heightens the intimacy in "Of Light" by adding to its layers the echo of the "Poem of Night's" narrative.

Finally, Shahid takes the last two lines of the Kinnell poem "The Burn": "On these beaches / the sea throws itself down, in flames," and makes them the first line of a couplet ending in "as we bring back, at sunset, the incarnadine of light." Here Shahid wrests new meaning from Kinnell's lines. In what is otherwise unrelentingly sorrowful, Shahid adds a new ending to Kinnell's "The Burn," one invested with hope. There are two couplets before Shahid makes a turn in the final couplet. These lines, spatially and logically, push back against the hope shaped from Kinnell's "The Burn." In the penultimate couplet, Shahid returns to Kinnell's "Goodbye." This time, he hinges a line of his own to a Kinnell line. The first half of the couplet comes from "Goodbye," the latter is Shahid's: "One day

the streets all over the world will be empty; / from every tomb I'll learn all we imagine of light."¹⁶ The semi-colon here is subtle, together the two lines argue that there is pain so immense that it necessitates mourning and that from that mourning comes what we might imagine of light. From this turn comes Shahid's final call to Galway: "Galway, somehow with you in Freedom, New Hampshire, / Shahid won't let Death make of love a Ruin of light."¹⁷

Call Me Ishmael Tonight calls forth a tapestry of voices that is as political as it gets, even now, as our age still obsesses over the "I" and many poets work hard not to engage in the world around them or the lives outside the small circle of their loved ones. Shahid's ghazals allow the voices of others to share the spotlight in his songs, both to add measure and to add community. The first tenet of knowing the world is acknowledging the world. For many writers this acknowledgement comes from focusing the eye on that space that is other than self, and while this is admirable, it is not intimacy. Intimacy is the invitation we extend to others to speak. This is what Shahid does when he populates his work with the language of others, whether real others or others he has invented. And the inventions, the inclusions, and the juxtapositions work to create a tapestry that is personal and political. For political, take "Of Fire." The first line of the eleventh couplet, its own little poem, reads, "Soldier: 'The enemy can see you and that's how you die.'"¹⁸ The line is pulled from a quote in an article by Barry Bearak, "India and Pakistan: Frozen in Fury on the Roof of the World."¹⁹ Shahid doesn't offer context for the line, doesn't name the soldier, doesn't explain the roof of the world. But he invites us, as readers, to explore this, the news of the world, as if to say the first step to ending a war is to recognize that one exists.

But there is also something to be said for the way that Shahid's work is weighted by memory. From the mouths of other poets to the mouth of history to his own reluctant speaking, Shahid's ghazals capture something that is often avoided in the work of other poets. Call it an awareness of doubt, this willingness to invest in the importance of other voices to both add on to what is said and acknowledge what the poet cannot invent: a language to repair the fissures of disconnection.

In twenty-six of thirty-four poems, Agha Shahid Ali uses either italics or quotations to signify words coming from another source or speaker within a poem. In some poems, like "Things," Shahid uses his technique in eight of the fourteen couplets. The quotations

are not always lines from other poems, but rather, at times, Shahid uses quotations, italics, bold print to emphasize just how many voices populate the poem. The result, instead of a cacophony, is a single embroidered voice: a bridge to the disparate things from which Shahid made art. As with many of the poems in *Call Me Ishmael Tonight*, “Things” moves through the range of human emotions and the enterprises that drive them: from the death penalty to exile to rediscovered love to sorrow and joy. Each is a bridge to the other.

The final ghazal in *Call Me Ishmael Tonight* breaks down what this is all for. In “Existed,” Shahid writes, “If you leave who will prove that my cry existed?”²⁰ This collection answers that, as those who have existed find their cries made her, alongside Shahid’s. And so the poems are more of him and more of others. When the poet does it right, as Agha Shahid Ali does here, such a noticing, both of his own cultures and of those he finds himself surrounded by, offers an abundance, a way to get lost within yourself and find something new, as the past bumps against the present, which offers its own idiosyncrasies of language. I should be clear, though, what I mean to say is that Shahid, in his inventiveness, has crafted worlds into his poems.

Notes

1. Agha Shahid Ali, *The Veiled Suite: The Collected Poems* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2009), 326.
2. *Ibid.*, 327.
3. Ali, *Call Me Ishmael Tonight* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003), Foreward.
4. William Carlos Williams, *Asphodel, That Greeny Flower & Other Love poems* New Directions Paperbook 794 (New York: New Directions, 1994), 9.
5. Ali, *Veiled Suite*, 372–73.
6. *Ibid.*, 326.
7. *Ibid.*, 347.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Joseph Brodsky, *Collected Poems in English* (New York: Macmillan, 2002), 211.
10. Ali, *Veiled Suite*, 363–64.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Galway Kinnell, *The Book of Nightmares* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1973), 364.
13. Ali, *Veiled Suite*, 363–64.
14. *Ibid.*

15. Kinnell, *Book of Nightmares*.
16. Ali, *Veiled Suite*, 363–64.
17. Ibid.
18. Ali, *Veiled Suite*, 331.
19. Barry Bearak, “India and Pakistan: Frozen in Fury on the Roof of the World” *IBRU Boundary and Security Bulletin* (1999).
20. Ali, *Veiled Suite*, 376.

MAHWASH SHOAIB

“The grief of broken flesh”

*The Dialectic of Desire and Death in Agha Shahid Ali's Lyrics*¹

As a poet charting the “map of longing with no limits,”² Agha Shahid Ali (1949–2001) constantly interrogates the limits and demands of the flesh in his lyrics. In his inventory of literary and national markings, this Kashmiri American poet chronicles the different identities a poet carries from one country to another, whether those are based on belief, body, nation, or lyrical form. Ali takes his job of poet as witness seriously in his poetry: as his own namesake, the “Belovéd witness,”³ he attempts to give a human face to the suffering in the subcontinental region of Kashmir occupied by India and Pakistan. Ali's poetry is a comprehensive reconstruction of memory in a race against time and, at moments, he seems to give up and trap himself in the past: he reinvents Kashmir as an “imaginary homeland, / filling it, closing it, shutting” his self in it.⁴ My inquiry seeks the traces of a queer lyrical persona in Agha Shahid Ali's highly structured compilations of desire and loss and its imprints within his negotiations of faith and mortality.

To analyze the dialogue between desire and faith in Ali's poetry, I will begin with his “Farewell,” a poem of leave taking and refrains addressed to a Kashmiri pandit.⁵ I read it as a love poem, a final accounting of the failure of love. Besides listing concrete details of bloodshed, the speaker complicates the demarcations between memory and history and notes the impossibility of forgiveness by the Belovéd:

You needed me. You needed to perfect me:
In your absence you polished me into the Enemy.
Your history gets in the way of my memory.
I am everything you lost. You can't forgive me.
I am everything you lost. Your perfect enemy.
Your memory gets in the way of my memory:⁶

A direct homosexual reference can be found in the speaker's anguish over not being able to reveal his agony to anyone, barely acknowledging it himself: "I hid my pain even from myself; I revealed my pain only to myself," the same expression of pain and longing for a lost love appearing in every poem of his collections. The last line records the speaker's ultimate regret: "If only somehow you could have been mine, / what would not have been possible in the world?"⁷ Ali's masked revelation of his homosexuality and his musings on death in his lyrics form the focus of this essay. I propose that his passion for formal lyricism (occasionally his only source of consummation) also helps closet his bodily self. Sexual desire is submerged by Ali's need to conform to the more demanding forms of poetry from multiple traditions, most often captured in the literary figure of the ambiguously gendered Belovéd. Traditionally, the gender of the figure of the Belovéd, the *mahbūb*, is deliberately left unspecified for both straight and queer male Urdu poets;⁸ in classical Sufi and Urdu literature the Belovéd is also alluded to as the divine, and in modern Urdu poetry the figure may also carry revolutionary impetus. Building on a robust tradition of spiritual doubt and questioning in the ghazal, Ali's Kashmiri syncretism and Sufi vision aid him in an interrogation of divine design. The spiritual crisis Ali recounts in the last three volumes published in his lifetime—*A Nostalgist's Map of America*, *The Country without a Post Office*, and *Rooms Are Never Finished*—is in tandem with the agony of longing and loss that becomes a haunting force in his poetry.

The discourse of evanescent love is a prevailing element of the ghazal, a poem of stylistically but not thematically rhyming couplets. Ali was a champion of the English ghazal, a hybrid form of Indo-Persian and Anglo-American literary traditions. While Ali's English ghazals fulfill the parameters of unrequited desire, coded eroticism, and mystical questioning that form the structure of the traditional ghazal, the mythological and religious narratives of love that he recounts can be read as queered in his other poems too. For Ali, the ghazal's formal and, rooted in tradition, erotic veiling permits him to disavow corporeal desire for affected and spiritual desire, and it remains what it is—longing. The body (especially the male body, in its masked profanity and physicality) becomes the sacred temple that cannot be violated even as images of contamination—physical torture, disease, and death—abound near the end of his oeuvre. For Ali, the topography of erotics is mapped with the language of violence and imminent death. Interestingly,

veiled portrayals of the body of the mother and its decay through disease and death, which we see in the series of poems dedicated to the poet's mother in *Rooms Are Never Finished*, compete with the ellipsis of another male body in the text, that of the poet. The poet's corporeal self is mostly captured in reflections in mirrors, as virtually disembodied and exiled. The reiteration of mirrors in his poetry also signifies a representation technique: if the poet's physical being is fragmented and broken in a mirror, the mirror also becomes the funhouse of identity the poet returns to repetitively to try out new personae and new manifestations of love: "My world would be / mere mirrors cut to multiply, then multiply // in. But for small hands. Invisible. Quick . . ." ⁹

"The grief of broken flesh" ¹⁰ in Agha Shahid Ali's poetry is quite literally rooted in the Shi'a narratives that Ali recounts in his last volume, but it is also in the trauma of approaching death, the deterioration of the speaker's body, and the images of torture relayed in the war-ravaged Kashmir. A distinct Shi'a Muslim sensibility begins to infuse Ali's poetry with *The Country*, as with the poem "Muharram in Srinagar, 1992." The aspect of mourning becomes even more evident with *Rooms Are Never Finished*, which has four *marsi-yas*. ¹¹ Here the equivocal depiction of the mutilated male body and mourning of its loss is derived from *azadari*, the Shi'a ritual of mourning for the martyrs who died with the grandson of Prophet Muhammad, Imam Hussain, at the battlefield of Karbala in A.D. 680. An intense Shi'a identification with death and martyrdom has always been a part of Ali's poetics, and its intensity partly has to do with the autobiographical occurrence of the poet's knowledge of his own impending mortality. Given the violence as experienced by common Kashmiris and chronicled by Ali in *The Country*, it is understandable that Ali would equate the bloodshed at Karbala with the carnage in Kashmir, when "Death had turned every day in Kashmir into some family's Karbala." ¹² Ali's religious affinity comes across most clearly in *Rooms*, in "From Amherst to Kashmir," the series of poems elegizing his mother, Imam Hussain, and the martyrs of Karbala. ¹³ Not only does Ali draw personal dimensions from the epic tragedy, even as he remains in "utter disbelief," ¹⁴ but the universe laments in these poems for those he deems martyrs for love in his underlining that "*God is the only, the only assassin.*" ¹⁵

If, on the one hand, Ali encloses himself in his expression of personal and collective holocausts, he also shares homoerotic affiliation with certain American antecedents: his poetics shows the in-

fluences of Emily Dickinson, James Merrill, W. S. Merwin, T. S. Eliot, and W. H. Auden. Ali's deference to these particular American poets—all of which, save Merwin, may be argued to be either openly or undeclared queer poets—also reflects a desire of the closeted gay poet to acknowledge his own sexuality. By incorporating their verses into the body of his own work, Ali seeks acceptance in a poetic genealogy that engages the “erotics of pedagogy,” a way of accepting the anxiety of influence of the older poets.¹⁶ For instance, Ali echoes Dickinson's epigrammatic elliptical lyrics in three consecutive poems in *The Country*, and the poems of Dickinson that Ali quotes from contain a language of violence woven with naturalistic images of desire,¹⁷ which Ali integrates with verses of spiritual crisis and ultimately divine mercy. His poetry reveals an aching homoerotic charge over a divided self that cannot be reconciled, which can also be found in Dickinson's unconsummated love for the women in her most intimate circle, most notably her sister-in-law Susan Dickinson, and which is revealed in the “coded declarations of desire” in the letter-poems addressed to her.¹⁸ It is Ali's “Ghazal” in this book that is similar to Dickinson's latent homoerotic love poems combined with her delineation of the spiritual.¹⁹ Dickinson's Poem # 473, “I am ashamed—I hide— / What right have I—to be a bride—,” from which Ali quotes in his “Ghazal,” contains imagery of the speaker preparing her trousseau, which is conflated with a contentious relationship with the divine. In “Ghazal” Ali also fuses a Belovéd who is both mortal and divine in love's rejection:

Where are you now? Who lies beneath your spell tonight
before you agonize him in farewell tonight?

Pale hands that once loved me beside the Shalimar:
Whom else from rapture's road will you expel tonight?

Those “Fabrics of Cashmere—” “to make Me beautiful—”
“Trinket”—to gem—“Me to adorn—How—tell”—tonight?²⁰

The bridal imagery in Ali's “Ghazal” also alludes to the erotically spiritual divine-human love and the gendered language of the *murshad*-master and *murid*-disciple relationships in classical Sufism.²¹ The ghazal in Ali's hands becomes a repository of grappling with faith: “I beg for haven: Prisons, let open your gates— / A refugee from Belief seeks a cell tonight . . . And I, Shahid, am only escaped to tell thee— / God sobs in my arms. Call me Ishmael tonight.”²²

Since in Sufi thought references to a Belovéd are not just to an earthly but a divine form, the composite nature of the figure allows us to read Ali's relationship with the ambiguously gendered Belovéd as inversions of both the corporeal and divine kind, homoeroticism suggested in an oblique manner.

Most critics have noted that regardless of Ali's cautious self-disclosure of his sexual identity in his earlier poetry, the poems in *A Nostalgist's Map* are a clearer manifestation of his coming to terms with this aspect of his subjectivity.²³ The evanescence cycle of poems in Ali's *A Nostalgist's Map* are a "rehearsal of loss"²⁴ dedicated to Philip Paul Orlando, a friend who died of AIDS. In this earlier volume, the body of the Belovéd is presented only in refractions: "I have no house only / a shadow but whenever you are in need / of a shadow my shadow is yours."²⁵ As a nostalgist, while traveling from Amherst to Arizona, Ali maps his host country, America, with the absence of the male lover's body. He says, "I live in Evanescence / (I had to build it, for America / was without one)."²⁶ Thus the poems represent the disjunctive attempt of the grieving poet to trace a palimpsest of the physical topography of America with the absent body of the Belovéd. The poems allude to an affair that ended with no definite farewells seven years before his love's demise; the poet tries to accommodate Phil's ghostly voice in the present, which tells the poet that he waited too long.²⁷ He searches for evanescence while the Belovéd's corporeal self threatens to be outshone by the poet's lyrical self in his attempts to re-create the lost summer in strict forms of poetry. He realizes that he cannot regain what he has lost already: "there's nothing in this world but hope: I have / everyone's address. Everyone will write: / And there's everything in this world but hope."²⁸ This physical and spectral void of the male body emerges as a yawning gap in Ali's latter poetry, imparted with the fact of the poet's own impending death.

While Ali begins to lyrically prefigure his death in *The Country* ("I will die, in autumn, in Kashmir, / and the shadowed routine of each vein / will almost be news, the blood censored"),²⁹ the interlocked note of desire and loss also begins to gather urgency. In the title poem of the volume he states, "I read them, letters of lovers, the mad ones, / and mine to him from whom no answers came."³⁰ Dedicated to Ali's mentor, the poet James Merrill, who had a noted influence on Ali's formalized poetry,³¹ the poem shows the speaker searching frantically for signs of love in ruins and archives; he finds "the remains / of his voice, that map of longings with no limit," yet

consoles himself with receiving a mere token “if only in this way.”³² In “First Day of Spring” there is another snippet of forsaken love: “And now on earth, you and I, with longing so flawed / that: Angel forced to grow not wings but arms, why aren’t you / holding me this day—perfect for forgetting God?”³³ The love poems in this volume are conjunctions of faith and eroticism, disbelief and desire. Where desire shapes the lyric by providing forward momentum and pushing toward a possible future consummation in Ali’s verse, his love poetry also shows linkages with the violence and trauma he has witnessed. As the exiled poet attempts to return to an abode of love, he is frustrated to find himself in a desolate present: “Mirror after mirror, / textiled by dust, will blind us to our return.”³⁴ Ali still attempts to establish a “map of the lost,” of those “who haunt / a country when it is ash,” and, in communicating the urgency to impart messages (“This is a shrine / of words. You’ll find your letter to me. And mine / to you. Come soon and tear open these vanished envelopes”), still entrusts poetry with the potential to reconcile, in his gentle words, “Mad heart, be brave.”³⁵

Every narrative of love in Ali’s lyrics is queered in this reading, be that of Eurydice and Orpheus, Radha and Krishna, or Laila and Majnoon, not surprising since these are also quest narratives, of a lover traveling to find the Belovéd. That these migrations undertaken for love also end as narratives of loss and death does not undermine the quest itself, the desiring of an other that re-creates the purpose of life. Ali’s recounting of homosexual loss becomes especially obvious in the pairing of Iblis/Satan and God in “A Secular Comedy” from *Rooms Are Never Finished*. In this trilogy of poems (titled “Heaven,” “Earth,” and “Hell”), Ali most clearly delineates the fragile fleshly delight and lasting sorrow of a mortal adoration that takes on divine proportions. In these three poems Ali re-creates the Sufi rendition of the relationship between a jealous Satan and a repentant God (“love’s first story: God and Satan—”),³⁶ in a narrative of love and loss that acquires earthly dimensions only in the middle poem, “Earth.” Here Ali recounts a night spent with a companion in an Oregon hotel, accented with the grief of separation but also the possibility of the incorporation of his Belovéd’s self in his own: “he’s settling on me his gaze now, / entering my sleep. What remains of night he / owns, and he’s its message to me, awake, his / hair on my shoulder.”³⁷ The last word, however, belongs to Iblis in Pandemonium as he delineates the compensations of physical and spiritual desire: “*Heaven’s nights, His blood, then His flesh, my*

open / wings that tightly closed to again be opened. . . . / Stop. I must. This hour, my Belovéd Tyrant / surely is weeping."³⁸ The final poem of *Rooms*, "I Dream I Am at the Ghat of the Only World," weaves death and love together in the figure of a mysterious Belovéd, as Ali asks, "will he who wears his heart on sleeve eaves / drop always, in his inmost depths, on a cruel harbinger?" and is answered, "SHAHID, HUSH. THIS IS ME, JAMES. THE LOVED ONE ALWAYS LEAVES."³⁹ Ultimately poetry sustains and expands the narrowing world of his speakers, and perhaps in the dance of words death too becomes a Belovéd, an object of love.

It would seem that his presence in the South Asian diaspora would accord freedom for Ali to more bluntly unveil his homoerotic longing. The criticism of Ali's "damaging" refusal to be published in gay anthologies or to explicitly declare his sexual identity⁴⁰ simplifies the friction between multiple conflicting discourses that creates queer desire and pleasure in the diaspora, without subsuming to an overarching, dominant narrative of gay sexuality.⁴¹ In queered displacements, the closet can be read as a paradox of both agency and censorship for South Asian queer subjects,⁴² and the framing of publication and desire for the expression of an authentic sexual identity⁴³ can easily disregard the traces and valences of the queer male body in Ali's lyrics. For instance, Ali's passion for formalism (i.e., "pain as a formal feeling, one / useful for the letting go")⁴⁴ ostensibly closets his bodily self further. In privileging stringent formal techniques, whether from Urdu or English literary traditions, Ali restrains his queer desire under the disguise of heightened lyricism. Yet with the collections published after his death, *Call Me Ishmael Tonight* and *The Veiled Suite*, he seems to fuse the rupture between closeting corporeality and disclosing an increasingly mystical bent by becoming more daring in his choice of words and allusions. Accordingly, the lines of his poems become progressively longer with each volume, connected from one verse to another through enjambments, rhymes, and sustained imagery. From *A Nostalgist's Map of America* onward to his posthumously published collections, Ali employs the forms of the ghazal, canzone, sestina, villanelle, syllabics, terza rima, and Sapphic ode. If the rhythm of the line seems to be disjunctive and fragmented for the sake of maintaining the evenness of a syllabic or villanelle or sestina, the cadence of the line itself is carried over from one verse and stanza to another and the tempo—the yearning toward ecstasy—is never dissonant. Through the volumes, Ali's poetry evolves, becoming more lyrically

balanced in his maintenance of the demands of rhyme and refrain, metrical and syllabic intensity; heightened lyricism thus becomes a means of attempting to reconcile his many divided selves. With the employment of forms that require the poet to replicate words and verses in every stanza or every other line, Ali not only forces the reader to reiterate the idea behind the lyrics but also creates an elliptical passage for himself in the poems so that he reaffirms the lyric as his sole remaining abode. As he matures into his later works, the formal recurring of words and verses and the measured use of poetic artifice and literary allusions allow him to verbalize homoerotic heartache and desire more clearly and boldly. This erotic play, by turns lighthearted and solemn, is palpable in the newer and reworked ghazals of *Call Me Ishmael Tonight*; he asserts, “‘Is my love nothing for I’ve borne no children?’ / I’m with you, Sappho, in that anarchist land.”⁴⁵

Perhaps the poem that makes visible the sealed rupture between veiled libidinal desire and an eventually defiant faith is Ali’s last published canzone, “The Veiled Suite,” from the compendium of his poetry of the same name. Ali had composed the poem specifically for a collaboration with the artist Izhar Patkin; Patkin, corresponding to the ethereal nature of the poem, titled his installation *The Veil Suite*.⁴⁶ Here Ali renders into verse the Sufi trope of the veil between the mortal and the divine, the lover and the Belovéd, which both hides and manifests God. *Kashf*/the lifting of the veil happens once the divine being reveals itself and the disciple reaches the plane of consummation, *fana*/absolute annihilation and absorption in God.⁴⁷ Ali attempts to ultimately fuse the self and the other, his body and that of the Belovéd, “*Make me now your veil then see if you can veil / yourself from me*,”⁴⁸ dropping the veil and uncovering simultaneously, even as the lyric verges on a narrative of impossibilities. The poem builds on the crescendo of locking gaze with this Belovéd who insinuates creation and doom in his eyes:

I wait for him to look into my eyes.
This is our only chance for magnificence.
. . . Wherever he turns, what will not appear but my eyes?
Wherever he looks, the sky is only eyes.⁴⁹

For the poet, finally, the night of longing stretches infinitely into an absolute night of union (“he will lead each night from night into night”), capturing echoes from the Sufi lexicon, Faiz Ahmed Faiz’s

famous ghazal “Dasht e Tanhai,” and Ali’s own oeuvre. Ever the chronicler of sensual and spiritual desire, Ali extracts a promise from the Belovéd “that when you divide what remains of this night / it will be like a prophet once parted the sea” and cheekily declares without more ado, “But no one must die!”⁵⁰ If *kashf* is the unveiling of mysteries by God, then with the preceding verses Ali also evokes the Sufi tradition of God’s *tajalli*/revelation of himself, without a veil, to Moses on Mount Sinai, when the whole mountain crumbled from a single manifestation.⁵¹ The speaker of the poem converses in sublime awe with his deathly Belovéd, and the sheer cadences of their exchange extend beyond scrims, candlelit shadows, and the fluorescence cast by tears in the Belovéd’s eyes. In line after line he throws challenges to this divine love and ends the poem with the envoi,

What arrangements haven’t you made for tonight!
I am to hand you a knife from behind the veil
now rising quickly from your just-lit incense.
I’m still alive, alive to learn from your eyes
that I am become your veil and I am all you see.⁵²

Here, in a final marriage of aesthetic and ecstatic elements,⁵³ Ali the witness and the lover can invert the relationship to become the Belovéd himself. The dialectical opposition between desire and death, flesh and spirit, is seemingly resolved in Ali’s lyrics by incorporating the two in a final consummation; yet the corpus of the poet remains absent and immaterial since the consummation is reached in a dream sequence, the subliminal state. The disembodied persona that Ali promotes through the latter part of his poetics (through motifs of mirrors, letters, ghosts, witnesses) becomes final in this aspect, but the lyric offers a possibility of compensating for loss, if not transcending it, by at least identifying and embracing it. Instead of a requiem, the controlled strictures of the conclusion offer Ali the transformative space to envisage an amorphous yet legible body in the encompassing gaze of a Belovéd. How else to metonymically recuperate an absent queer body, then, if not in words? Where else but in a lyric can the perpetual dissatisfaction of desire be executed?

Notes

1. This essay originates from conference presentations and from a chapter on Agha Shahid Ali's poetry in my dissertation; I am grateful to my advisors for their valuable feedback.

2. Ali, *Veiled Suite*, 204.

3. He famously intones, "They ask me to tell them what *Shahid* means— / Listen: It means 'The Beloved' in Persian, 'witness' in Arabic." Ibid., 226.

4. Ibid., 171.

5. According to Ali, it is at only one level "a plaintive love letter from a Kashmiri Muslim to a Kashmiri Pandit." Ibid., 377.

6. Ibid., 176.

7. Ibid., 177.

8. Faruqi, "Conventions of Love," 17. According to Faruqi, "Questions about the beloved's gender didn't bother the poets of that time because they weren't practicing 'realism' or writing autobiographical poems. The beloved was, first and foremost, an idea, and that idea could be represented in one of many ways. The beloved's anthropomorphic character was often left vague, especially by poets inclined toward Sufism. The general literary feeling was, anyway, in favor of ambiguity and richness of interpretive potential."

9. Ali, *Veiled Suite*, 278.

10. Ibid., 140. In the last line of the second section of "From Another Desert" Ali recalls broken statues in temples and a god returning, lonely, to a wrecked temple without adorers.

11. A *marsiya*, in Urdu literary tradition, is a six-line unit of a rhyming quatrain and a couplet containing a different rhyme, an elegy recounting the martyrdom of Hussain and the tribulations of his family.

12. Ali, *Veiled Suite*, 252.

13. Ramazani, *Poetry and Its Others*, 177–78.

14. Ali, *Veiled Suite*, 257. Later in the poem he says, "It is Muharram again. / Of God there is no sign" (258).

15. Ibid., 269; this is a theme Ali returns to in his final poem.

16. Guy-Bray, *Loving in Verse*, 98. Guy-Bray reads the Bloomian anxiety of influence as homoerotic to begin with. According to him, the nature of the connection between the poets who assimilate the works of earlier queer poets is circular: "These texts are part of the internal world of the younger poets, something to which they always and even inevitably return. . . . This circularity is not pointless, but rather, endlessly productive" (100).

17. Ali quotes from Dickinson's Poem # 64 ("Some Rainbow coming from the Fair— / Some Vision of the World Cashmere"), Poem # 110 ("Artists wrestled here / Lo, A Tint Cashmere! / Lo, A Rose!") Poem # 179 ("If I could bribe them by a Rose / I'd bring them every flower that grows / From Amherst to Cashmere!"), and Poem # 473 ("I'm ashamed—I hide— / What right have I—to be a Bride").

18. Hart, "Encoding of Homoerotic Desire," 253.

19. Gelpi, *Emily Dickinson*, 121. In an early letter to Higginson, Dickinson admitted, "My Business is Circumference" (*Letters* 2:408, cited in Gelpi,

Emily Dickinson), circumference signifying the extension and limit of spiritual ecstasy, “a complex symbol for those disrupted moments when in some sense time transcends time,” connected with feelings of sublime fear or terror mingled with aesthetic perception.

20. Ali, *Veiled Suite*, 193.

21. Malamud, “Gender and Spiritual Self-Fashioning,” 98, 100; Abbas, *Female Voice in Sufi Ritual*, 65.

22. Ali, *Veiled Suite*, 193. “Ghazal” in *The Country*, later titled “Tonight,” with the addition of further couplets, in *Call Me Ishmael Tonight*.

23. Roberts, *Companion to Twentieth Century Poetry*, 274. Roberts refers to “Ali’s longing for a male American lover” in *A Nostalgist’s Map*. Summers, *Gay and Lesbian Literary Heritage*, 620–21. According to Summers, “Ali appears less anxious to conceal his sexuality. ‘A Nostalgist’s Map of America,’ written after learning about a close friend’s AIDS diagnosis, is an exceptionally powerful rendering of personal anguish. Homoerotic overtones are even more evident in ‘In Search of Evanescence,’ a haunting meditation on the poet’s relationship with Phil, the friend dying of AIDS.”

24. Ali, *Veiled Suite*, 112.

25. *Ibid.*, 128.

26. *Ibid.*, 120.

27. *Ibid.*, 133–34.

28. *Ibid.*, 135.

29. *Ibid.*, 181.

30. *Ibid.*, 205.

31. Ghosh, “Ghat of the Only World,” 31–32. Schneiderman, “The Loved One Always Leaves.”

32. Ali, *Veiled Suite*, 205.

33. *Ibid.*, 227.

34. *Ibid.*, 196.

35. *Ibid.*, 203–5.

36. *Ibid.*, 288.

37. *Ibid.*, 287.

38. *Ibid.*, 289.

39. *Ibid.*, 320.

40. Tellis, “Many Layers of Veil.” See also Merchant, “Agha Shahid Ali’s Kashmir.” Despite entreaties, Ali refused to have his work included in either Merchant’s *Yaraana: Gay Writing from South Asia* or Ruth Vanita and Saleem Kidwai’s *Same-Sex Love in India: Readings from Literature and History*; Ali’s work appears in the second edition of *Yaraana* posthumously.

41. Gopinath, *Impossible Desires*, 27.

42. Puar, “Transnational Configurations of Desire.”

43. Katyal, “Gay Writing,” 193. Katyal also provides an account and analysis of the interaction between Ali and Merchant on the publication in *Yaraana* and the possible reasons for Ali’s demurral.

44. Ali, *Veiled Suite*, 120. From Emily Dickinson, another poet of longing and unrequited desire, Ali transcribes, “After great pain—a formal feeling does come—I— // the society—of that sheer soul. The soul selects / its

own society: a formal feeling will come: // I want—Evanescence—slowly. After great pain” (131).

45. Ibid., 348.

46. Patkin, “Veiled Threats.”

47. Abbas, *Female Voice in Sufi Ritual*, 65–66.

48. Ali, *Veiled Suite*, 23.

49. Ibid., 25.

50. Ibid., 24.

51. Renard, *All the King's Falcons*, 29–31.

52. Ali, *Veiled Suite*, 25.

53. Woodland, “Memory’s Homeland,” 270–71. A key difference between Ali’s ghazals and his “European refrain-poems” is that he “permits himself far more lexical and semantic variation in the latter. . . . The overall impression is of a desire to maximize the effects of recontextualization, to make the refrain words generate the greatest possible degree of hybrid variability while obeying the laws of refrain.”

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SHADAB ZEEST HASHMI

“Who will inherit the last night of the past?”

Agha Shahid Ali's Architecture of Nostalgia as Translation

*“Each ray of sunshine is seven minutes old,”
Serge told me in New York one December night.*

*“So when I look at the sky, I see the past?”
“Yes, Yes,” he said, “especially on a clear day.”
—AGHA SHAHID ALI, “SNOW ON THE DESERT”*

That the sunlight holds the past for seven more minutes, as if it is a keeper of memory, excites Agha Shahid Ali, for whom history is home—the beloved’s campsite—where he sings and sings. A quintessential nostalgist, with his beloved Kashmir as the measure of all beauty and longing, Ali remembers more than his own exile in his poetry—his is a cosmic nostalgia that takes history itself as idiom. This nostalgia, braided together in the literary tropes he inherited from the Western and Eastern traditions, transcends culture, reflecting in the vastness of sky and desert: the New York sky shows him the past, the realm of unchronicled time; the Arizona desert teaches him to desire like Majnoon, that Persio-Arabic archetype of eternal longing and pursuit. In the embrace of this expansive memory, Ali pieces his mosaics through constant translation, recalling the varied textures of the literatures and landscapes he calls his own, but he finds that many particularities belonging to his native culture cannot be pieced together coherently due to the absence of a lexicon, a backstory, in English. By attempting literary translations of Urdu verse and explaining the nuts and bolts of the ghazal, Ali builds a new literary lexicon, one that is fueled by and filtered through his own nostalgia.

Agha Shahid Ali’s nostalgia is a crucial force because his purpose is not just to remember but to record the intricacies of a culture

under threat of erasure in occupied Kashmir. His belief in memory as material for coining a new language is so great that he welcomes even the apparently untranslatable. In an interview (titled "Walking between the Raindrops with Agha Shahid Ali," June 29, 1997) with an Indian newspaper, Ali states, "The superstitious mountains of Arizona are not the Karakoram Range or the Hindu Kush mountains, but there are so many similarities in mythic structures around the world." Finding the patterns of similarity is of course as important as finding the differences, as he goes on to say in the same interview, "Two moments juxtaposed to show that neither can be compared to the other or anything else. But that juxtaposition creates a kind of translation, a kind of crossover." Translation, seeing one thing in terms of another, even in its incomparability, is Ali's way of enlarging a personal moment, to relive it in its more poignant, expansive, cohesive form, an aspect that informs his work as an intermediary between cultures.

Referring to a poem of his, he describes this impulse to capture multiple "dimensions" in a poem: "This cry to be remembered and the language to be remembered, seen in terms of my friend's death, acquired other dimensions. Edward Said talks about a contrapuntal rhetoric, which means you read something with several things happening simultaneously. It's not just the death of a friend, a simple elegy, but the death of tribes, the death of landscapes and the death of a language. All these things happen simultaneously to create a density." This referential simultaneity is precisely how Urdu poetry, based on the Persio-Arabic-Indic network of metaphors, elliptical, allusion-rich, works: a fact that further complicates and intensifies Ali's urgency to generate poetry that embodies the confluence and contrast of the two rich (and sometimes divergent) traditions he belongs to—his "simultaneous love of Urdu and English." He says, "Neither love is acquired; I was brought up a bilingual, bicultural (but never rootless) being."

Agha Shahid Ali's work enacts translation as historical moments, cultures, personae, and landscapes cross thresholds continuously and almost ecstatically in all his collections of poetry; yet one can detect disappointment or a sense of loneliness, call it poetic anxiety if you will, about the esoteric breadth he is attracted toward and capable of (insofar as his Eastern aesthetic spirit and knowledge and experience are concerned) and the limitations posed by having to explain Eastern allusions to contemporary American readers, his primary audience. He addresses this concern quite articulately in his prose—

and in a tone that has a hint of angst, in his introduction to *The Rebel's Silhouette*, a collection of translations of Faiz Ahmed Faiz's poetry: "To have to introduce Faiz's name, to explain who he was, seemed an insult to a very significant element of my culture." Ali, who is obviously hurt by the fact that a renowned world poet such as Faiz is completely absent from discussion (as is Urdu poetry on the whole), proceeds to introduce both Faiz and Urdu's great pride, the ghazal form, to American poets. Ali's own inclusive spirit allows him to pour his angst into this loving and patient cultivation—a cultural translation large enough to hold his cosmic nostalgia, pliable enough to move back and forth effortlessly between two disparate traditions, subtle enough to genuinely move the reader.

Ali teaches the Western reader how to decode South Asian aesthetic gestures that have been centuries in the making, how to read hybridity, how not to feel lost in its abstract, elliptical spaces, rather how to fill them with the nostalgia that he amply, eloquently details in his work: Kashmir's heartbreaking beauty, its rich artistic heritage, colonial history, and life under occupation. What vivifies his theme as well as his personal idiom is the way he successfully imports Urdu's poetic sensibility. He does so by incorporating (in poems, translation, or commentary) Urdu poetry's distinctive tropes, captured in works by Ghalib, Faiz, and the ghazal singer Begum Akhtar—works of significance to a culture that is threatened in Ali's conflict-ridden birth country and is virtually unknown in his adopted country. Ali effectively lays the groundwork for a literary lexicon that encodes and communicates his native cultural memory in contemporary American literature.

Ali describes himself as an architect of nostalgia in his delightfully candid account of how he approached Faiz in a letter: "Besides asking for permission to translate him, I told him that I would be taking liberties with the originals. But what I really did was to bribe him with a sort of homecoming. I reminded him that he had, years before my birth, stayed in our home in Kashmir. I created nostalgia" (*Rebel's Silhouette*). What, after all, could be more disarming and persuasive to a poet than nostalgia? There was no doubt in Ali's mind that the memory of his home in Kashmir, recalling the sound of Begum Akhtar's voice singing his ghazals, would warm the legendary Faiz Ahmed Faiz to his younger peer, and he was right.

Agha Shahid Ali admires Faiz's robust, modern style, rooted firmly in tradition but departing with a finesse and a force that responds with brilliance to global concerns—for which reason it car-

ries over to English successfully, though frustratingly for Ali, it does not translate in all the ways he deems critical; an example is the translation of the poem “Mujh say pehli si mohabbat” (“Don’t Ask Me for That Love Again”), of which Ali writes, “But how to point out to exclusively English speakers the moment when what they see as merely exotic is actually challenging the ‘exotic’? In ‘Don’t Ask me for the Love Again,’ Faiz breaks radically from Urdu’s usual manner of looking at the ‘beloved,’ asking that his social commitment be accepted as more important than their love.” Ali is right in suggesting that, in order to truly appreciate Faiz’s use of the classical trope of the “beloved,” how he “turns it against itself,” one would have to be well versed in Urdu poetics—this poem being an important instance of Faiz’s revolutionary recasting of tradition, both stylistically and thematically.

Ali’s many attempts to experiment with the ghazal form—that definitive poetic enterprise of the Urdu canon—resulted in great insights into Urdu poetry and Urdu poetry in English translation. Working on translations of Faiz, Ali is very well aware of the limitations of this task as well as the subjectivity of choices or the trade-off that this task must entail: “Will something be borne across to exclusively English readers through my translations? I also hope that those who know both languages will find moments of literal fidelity to Faiz as well as in those moments (of fidelity, I insist) when I am unfaithful. As for purists, I hope they will be generous and welcome the times when I had no choice but to adjust, especially in the ghazal, the letter of Faiz’s work—a letter to which I have visceral attachment. But only in the original Urdu.”

The “visceral attachment” that Ali mentions is exactly the paradoxical hinge of his work as a translator. He recalls how Urdu poetry entered his psyche: “I must have then begun to internalize Faiz, repeating to myself the Urdu original. . . . Without any clear understanding of the lines, I somehow felt the words, through their sounds, through my father’s rhythmic, dramatic voice.” On the one hand he is under the spell of pure nostalgia, finding in Faiz’s poetry ghosts of his own past; on the other, he teaches himself to appreciate, on a cerebral level, the technical mastery of Faiz’s work, the transformative quality of his craft. Rather than settling on a single method of translation, Ali employs a dual, even dichotomous approach as a translator—he holds on to the innocence of nostalgia as a compass guiding him to get the translation right in some instances; in others he relies on a carefully studied approach of trans-

lating Faiz's Urdu into English. He states that he has not followed any particular model of translation. Instead, he has allowed each poem to dictate to him how it wants to be translated. As a result, some poems take the kind of lyrical leaps that Faiz takes, while others are almost prosaic. Ali says of the latter, "Sometimes explanation is the best way to translate. . . . I had to fill in the elliptical moments." This seems to be especially true about Ali's translation of Faiz's ghazals; he unpacks the condensed verses in an attempt to serve the original better by contextualizing the content and acclimatizing the tropes to English; what he loses in intensity, he gains in clarity. At times, Ali uses this approach even in poems that do not have any perceptible "elliptical moment," such as Faiz's famous untitled verses "Raat yun dil mein":

ASH' AAR

raat yuun dil meN terii khoii huuii yaad aaii
 jaise viraane meN chupke se bahaar aa jaae
 jaise sahraaoN meN haule se chale baad-e-nasiim
 jaise biimaar ko bevajah qaraar aa jaae

LAST NIGHT (TRANSLATION BY AGHA SHAHID ALI)

At night my lost memory of you returned
 and I was like the empty field where springtime,
 without being noticed, is bringing flowers;
 I was like the desert over which
 the breeze moves gently, with great care;
 I was like the dying patient
 who, for no reason, smiles

LAST NIGHT (TRANSLATION BY V. G. KIERNAN)

Last night your faded memory filled my heart
 Like spring's calm advent in the wilderness,
 Like the soft desert footfalls of the breeze,
 Like peace somehow coming to one in sickness.

Neither translation measures up to the original in freshness, partly because the verses (among Faiz's best known and sung by

major artists in the “Urduphone” world) are sonically driven. Kieran’s version, however, is truer to Faiz in the way it captures with economy (just as in the original) the sense of sudden peace—a feeling that stitches together three different scenes (spring in the wilderness, breeze in the desert, relief to the sick) with the simple spontaneity of “like.” The dominant feeling in Faiz’s original poem is the furtive, sudden way in which the beloved’s memory transforms him. That feeling is less vivid in Ali’s version.

Ali’s translations of Faiz’s poems such as “Evening,” “A Prison Daybreak,” and “August 1952” are exceptionally well done, as they preserve Faiz’s voice to a great extent. The poem “Before You Came” is perhaps Ali’s most successful work of translation, as he meets Faiz’s lyricism with elegant phrases such as “a color at the edge of blood” and “the road a vein about to break.” The world of this powerful poem is colored with the beloved’s absence, a moment not unlike the present when we have recently witnessed the loss of Agha Shahid Ali’s childhood home in the devastation brought on by floods in Kashmir: his beloved lost forever.

Ali, who performs translation as a prism for cultural memory, guiding readers through his heritage, who teaches us history, to honor history, Ali who breaks our hearts with poems of loss, who celebrates with nostalgia, whose name means “witness,” was fortunate not to be here to witness his Rajbagh home submerged in the very waters he loved, his precious letters, photographs, books destroyed; one beloved outdone by another. An exquisite antique shawl with the map of Srinagar woven into it (a work that took over twenty- seven years for a famous artisan to finish), damaged in Srinagar Museum, is reminiscent of Ali’s mapmaking of an endangered culture; these “threads of Kashmir,” the sunken home, have already been turned into an unforgettable song by Ali, and we are the fortunate recipients of an inheritance enlarged and enriched in literature.

Freedom’s terrible thirst, flooding Kashmir,
is bringing love to its tormented glass,
Stranger, who will inherit the last night of the past?
Of what shall I not sing, and sing?

—Agha Shahid Ali, “A Villanelle”

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GRACE SCHULMAN

The Chain

One afternoon in the spring of 2000 I rode the C train to Brooklyn, carrying a manuscript to Agha Shahid Ali in his apartment on Emerson Place. Above the rumble and screech of the local I heard the voices of more than seventy American poets. In my handbag was a sheaf of pages sent to me by a man I didn't know, M. L. "Marty" Williams, who had edited a chain of ghazal couplets the poets had composed to cheer Shahid in the illness that was to end his life on December 8, 2001. Williams, who taught creative writing at Valdosta State University in Georgia, had asked me to bring the ghazal chain to Shahid.

The chain was appropriate, for the ghazal was a passion for Shahid, who was born in New Delhi, raised in Kashmir, and wrote powerfully in English. Shahid's prose essays and poems charmed many American poets into writing "the true ghazal." As he said, the form is at least as old as seventh-century Arabia, mastered in Persian by Hafiz, a contemporary of Chaucer, and in Urdu by Ghalib, a contemporary of Keats. Shahid advocated (but did not always practice) the strict use of the form: independent couplets, each with a rhyming word (*qafia*) and a refrain (*radif*), and ending with a signature couplet (*makhta*). An anthology he edited, *Ravishing DisUnities: Real Ghazals in English*, consisting of authentic ghazals by Americans, attests to his teachings. His own practice was radiant, as in his true "Ghazal," which begins, "Where are you now? Who lies beneath your spell tonight / Before you agonize him in farewell tonight?"

And another of his poems called "Ghazal," freer in its form, opens with:

The only language of loss left in the world is Arabic.
These words were said to me in a language not Arabic.

Important as it was for him, the ghazal was not central to Shahid's art. With urgency and skill he wrote sonnets, villanelles, pan-

toums, and canzones. His mastery of form made for his remarkably subtle fusion of all cultures, simultaneously identifying with his Hindu, Muslim, and Western heritage. The title poem of what may be his finest book, *The Country without a Post Office*, presents his homeland's sufferings in ottava rima with an epigraph by Hopkins and a dedication to James Merrill.

Each writer contributed a couplet to the ghazal chain. Indeed, it was a hallelujah chorus I carried to Shahid. My mission was clear: besides being asked to give Shahid the ghazal chain, I was charged with obtaining a signature couplet from him, a *makhta* to close the poem.

To organize the chain, Williams began with a couplet given to him by Christopher Merrill, who had written his lines in a kind of ghazal contest with Shahid. Merrill had been housesitting for W. S. and Paula Merwin in Hawaii, an island Merrill and Shahid had often referred to as "the Promised Land." On the phone with Shahid, he said that he'd brewed tea in his hosts' kitchen and found no sugar in the Promised Land. Those last six words became the basis of Christopher Merrill's lead ghazal:

There is no sugar in the Promised Land.
Swear by the olive in the God-kissed land.

Merrill was to complete the ghazal only after Shahid had taken ill. He handed it to Williams, who commissioned and collected subsequent links. Kim Addonizio followed Merrill's lead with:

Swear by the pit, the root, the black drink
Searing the throat of the rain-blissed land.

Contributors were of many poetic persuasions. Now and always, poets have been known to be feisty protectors of their ideologies. Not so here. The ghazal chain is a dance of diverse performers. In it, remarkably, such things as poetic divisions, loyalties, and doctrines fade in the greater effort to honor Shahid. I'll quote a few of the couplets:

Let loose the frantic hummingbird! Beauty
Must sing the terror of this land.

Michael Collier

Just add me to the swelling list of names
That calls yours out across a rain-glossed land.

Maxine Kumin

Childhood's burnt cakes and phlegm—
Each of us comes from an unmissed land.

J. D. McClatchy

With all our art, where to? The map's of sand.
In a hand-cart the world has gone (to job-list land).

Heather McHugh

We will have to find sweetness of some other kind
To turn it into love-in-a-mist land.

W. S. Merwin

I can think only of my beloved friend
As I walk the beach & its misted sands.

David St. John

For by its oil, anointed, we conceive
The logic of believing: "a God-kissed land."

Sherod Santos

Our lamp-lit rooms have learned how to swim
Before our eyes. But let's dance as we planned.

Dorothea Tanning

"Without him," a voice was heard to whisper,
"Palm Springs is a parched and poulticed land."

Rachel Wetzsteon

At Shahid's apartment that day I greeted his brother, Agha Iqbal Ali ("Lala"), a mathematician. Another visitor was Padmini Mongia, a scholar of the late Victorian period in England. It was a lively scene: I, with my sheaf of papers, sat on a low sofa with Iqbal and

Padmini, a striking beauty wearing an Indian costume of billowing silk, cousin to the sari, both casual and elegant. We three consumed Iqbal's cucumber and yogurt salad with gusto, largely because we knew that Shahid, in health as in illness, enjoyed watching his friends eat.

Though ailing, Shahid had lost neither his humor nor his discernment. He told me that he wanted to recover his health and go dancing. He showed me a photograph, brought by a friend, of a landscape in his native Kashmir. He spoke of his recent American naturalization ceremony and sang a cowboy folksong in a creditable mock-Texas accent. He thought of his childhood, recounting an affectionate meeting with Prime Minister Nehru, following a letter he had written to the Indian leader. He told me of his mother's birth in the Indian province of Lucknow, which is known for its inhabitants' fine manners.

To my disappointment, he could not read the ghazal chain. When I began reciting it, his face lit up but he could not follow the words. I thought sadly of my mission to obtain the signature couplet.

Shahid remained silent. Suddenly Iqbal, Padmini, and I, speaking at once, offered phrases to one another from our low sofa. We sounded discordant, like an orchestra section tuning instruments before a concert. I wonder whether Franz Sussmayr, when finishing the Requiem Mass, aspired to emulate Mozart's style as much as we did Shahid's at that moment. We read. We sang. We were Shahid's voice.

Here is the final couplet we completed for him:

Lovers anticipate a beloved's thanks,
The pilot boy cried as he witnessed land.

Whatever else I remember about Shahid, I remember his dynamic reading, despite poor eyesight, to a packed house at Baruch College, where we were colleagues for a semester; his impromptu recitations of poems; his love of teaching. At his semester's end, Shahid's Baruch students dedicated their magazine to him, quoting his anecdote from Cocteau about homeowners discussing what they would carry away from a fire. One of them said, "The fire."

I remember the fire.

ADA LIMÓN

The Postcard and the Puzzle

For Agha Shahid Ali

Before Agha Shahid Ali died, I found a postcard in the bookstore close to where our class at New York University was held. The postcard was of a street in some faraway country with hundreds of bright pink shutters opening onto the avenue below. I gave Shahid the postcard because it reminded me of him—the colorful formality and visual repetition of these gorgeous things decorating an otherwise sad, cement scene. In return, he taught me about immortality.

In the spring of 2000, when I studied under Shahid, poetry and I were just starting to get to know one another, flirting in similar circles. I had an undergraduate degree in drama, experience working as an eager receptionist for “King County Water and Land Resources Division, How can I help you?,” and a lot of vague ideas about language and how I thought it could help me live.

In graduate school I thought the creative world of discovering things and listening and writing down bits and parts of poems and staring at trees was how life was going to be forever. I took this all very seriously. I was new at this. Shahid’s dark, round, euphoric face and openhearted posture immediately relaxed me. He was just fifty-one and his beaming grin and youthful posturing seemed to forgive my inexperience.

Thinking of Shahid makes me think of James Merrill’s poem “Lost in Translation.” He made us read the whole thing out loud during a class. I didn’t know he was sick at the time, but I remember we all groaned because the poem was so damn long. The poem, with a jigsaw puzzle as its central metaphor, is a masterful, tightly wrought, epic piece that deals with the inconsistencies of memory, Merrill’s great love of his nanny, whom he calls “French Mademoiselle,” and how we make our own myths.

It was like this: The class full of hunched-over worried poets—the smell of New York’s wet spring air hanging on us like some damp mixture of hope and desperation—and it was as if we were all putting together a new puzzle right then and there. Something strange was happening. Collectively, we were the child at the center of Merrill’s poem, each of us parentless, needy sponges, kneeling toward knowledge. Shahid was our own Mademoiselle, but he was from Kashmir.

Music was always what he pointed out. The slant rhymes, the end rhymes, the repetition. Watching him read a poem, or listen to someone else read a poem, was a lesson in embracing pure auditory delight. Certain sounds seemed to physically hurt him, others to soothe. A good rhyme could split his face in two with a grin so wide it went beyond his being. He loved the sounds in Merrill’s poem, but he also loved James Merrill the person. What I didn’t know then was how he was bringing him to life for us, setting him before us on the table so we could watch him breathe. Merrill had died in 1995.

Before I began to study poetry in earnest I liked poems in forms, but I didn’t love them. My grandma always asked me why poems didn’t rhyme any more. And after listening to Shahid read one of his poems in form, or in rhyming free verse—with their twisty sounds and visceral song quality—I began to wonder that, too. Shahid said his favorite rhyme in his own poetry was when he rhymed “blue tar” with “Utah,” in his poem “I See Chile in My Rearview Mirror” (*The Veiled Suite: The Collected Poems of Agha Shahid Ali* [2009], 161). He also said that if you put the hardest rhyme first, the easier rhyme comes as such a satisfying pleasure it feels almost ecstatic to the ear.

It’s difficult for people to discuss poems without discussing meaning. We tend to long for an explanation, human nature—or “Nay-tcha!” as Shahid was fond of saying in the style of Bette Davis—makes us desire meaning. We want to solve the poem (which of course is impossible, because poems require no solution). But in Shahid’s class, meaning was hardly ever discussed. It was music, music, music, mystery, and magic. He’d make us repeat the sounds of Merrill’s lines like “inchling, innocently branching palm.” Puzzle pieces plucked out of the poem and held up for us. “Hear this!” he’d say. And we would listen.

Some days, as I walk out in the woods far away from New York City, some thirteen years after that class, this line of Shahid's gets stuck in the spokes of my brain-wheel (from his poem "Ghazal"):

Each syllable sucked under waves of our earth—
The funeral love comes to hold in real time! (*Veiled Suite* 293)

Shahid was the first person I knew, closely, to die of cancer. A few years later my friend Analea would die of cancer, then my friend Jess died of cancer, and then a few years after that, I lost my stepmom to the disease. Right now I am wearing a scarf I gave my stepmom when she was still alive, and while looking for a note from Shahid I found a note from her. Then, I recalled this line of his from "From Another Desert":

Tonight the air is many envelopes again
tell her to open them all at once. (*Veiled Suite* 150)

Some nights after class, we'd gather at the tavern across the street. Drunk and eating chicken wings, there was talk about how we were all going to make a living. Shahid would close his eyes and recite poems. He told quick-witted stories, did marvelous impressions, and would have us reeling over wine and words. He wanted us to savor everything, all the senses. Everything matters. Surrender to the world's sound.

Picture this: A group of want-to-be wordsmiths bent over small dark brown desks in a New York building. Big windows. It's night but there are no owls or anything because it's the city. Streetlights. Spring's cold stubborn beginnings. We are reading this Merrill poem so slowly and it's driving us insane.

Gunmetal-skinned or pale, all plumes and scars,
Of Vassalage the noblest avatars—
The very coffee-bearer in his vair
Vest is a swart Highness, next to ours.

And you can see us, can't you? The unlucky reader, struggling with the lines, the class rocking as if in a boat that's been at sea too long; *Are we ever going to get there?* And at the helm is Shahid, repeating the lines again. Just as we think we're ready to move on, to fin-

ish the poem, Shahid says, “Read that part again.” Eyes roll, the anxious sailors look for land.

I didn’t like difficult poetry. I liked direct poetry that was straightforward and moving and said what it meant to say. This poem was hard. It wouldn’t open for me. And I hated it for not opening. The time would shift. The language would change. It was a puzzle, and then it was not a puzzle. I felt stupid and everyone else seemed smart. I wanted to go home to Brooklyn and watch a movie.

Even when Shahid grew very sick, he remained generous. That doesn’t happen to everyone. But his light was still going outward, still toward us, as if hoping to zap us into being before he could no longer be a being at all. His face changed, and his eyes, and I wanted to run away from it because it was death and I didn’t want anything to do with death. I was twenty-three and was never going to die.

At the end of the Merrill poem something shifted. I want to say, “suddenly everything changed.” But that’s not what happened. (Very few things happen “suddenly” in poetry.) The more I let the music of the poem, the sounds and strangeness of the poem, be—the more I allowed it to do what it was doing without forcing it—the more I began to enjoy the poem, and finally to enter it, and even to love it. I don’t know if that’s the first time that happened to me, but let’s say it was. Let’s say Shahid did that.

The poem is about what we hold on to, and how the past changes with our fallible memories, like how I am remembering this poem now, the event of reading it in the class. Even someone who was there could tell me it was different, that none of this happened, but it won’t matter. The puzzle piece that I remember, the piece I still have in my pocket, is that Agha Shahid Ali taught me what it was for a poem to communicate over time and space and death. And what it was to love a poem without fully understanding a poem—to let that sonic, sensual mystery be the gift. Merrill’s “Lost in Translation” ends like this:

And in that loss a self-effacing tree,
Color of context, imperceptibly
Rustling with its angel, turns the waste
To shade and fiber, milk and memory.

It is poetry. That's what he's saying—the puzzle, the stolen puzzle piece, all of it—that's how we remember, how we honor, with poetry, with this poem.

When I went to write this, I knew I wanted to include that postcard I gave to Shahid before he died, the one of the pink shutters opening to the street. A foggy memory surfaced, one where he had sent it back to me, I could see his handwriting on the back, and the postcard stamp with the date. But when I looked in the file where it would be, it wasn't there. The truth is, I think I made that part up, imagined the whole thing—like how I imagine Shahid now waving from those pink shutters, laughing at the intricate shaking sounds they make in the wind, telling us to listen, telling us to accept the sound as its own necessary message.

AMITAV GHOSH

The Ghat of the Only World

Agha Shahid Ali in Brooklyn

The first time that Agha Shahid Ali spoke to me about his approaching death was on April 25, 2001. The conversation began routinely. I had telephoned to remind him that we had been invited to a friend's house for lunch and that I was going to come by his apartment to pick him up. Although he had been under treatment for cancer for some fourteen months, Shahid was still on his feet and perfectly lucid, except for occasional lapses of memory. I heard him thumbing through his engagement book and then suddenly he said, "Oh dear. I can't see a thing." There was a brief pause and then he added, "I hope this doesn't mean that I'm dying . . ."

Although Shahid and I had talked a great deal over the last many weeks, I had never before heard him touch on the subject of death. I did not know how to respond: his voice was completely at odds with the content of what he had just said, light to the point of jocularity. I mumbled something innocuous: "No Shahid—of course not. You'll be fine." He cut me short. In a tone of voice that was at once quizzical and direct, he said, "When it happens I hope you'll write something about me."

I was shocked into silence and a long moment passed before I could bring myself to say the things that people say on such occasions: "Shahid, you'll be fine; you have to be strong . . ."

From the window of my study I could see a corner of the building in which he lived, some eight blocks away. It was just a few months since he moved there: he had been living a few miles away, in Manhattan, when he had a sudden blackout in February 2000. After tests revealed that he had a malignant brain tumor, he decided to move to Brooklyn, to be close to his youngest sister, Sameetah, who teaches at the Pratt Institute—a few blocks from the street where I live.

Shahid ignored my reassurances. He began to laugh and it was then that I realized that he was dead serious. I understood that he

was entrusting me with a quite specific charge: he wanted me to remember him not through the spoken recitatives of memory and friendship but through the written word. Shahid was unerring in his intuitions about people and he probably knew that my instincts would have led me to search for reasons to avoid writing about his death: I would have told myself that I was not a poet; that our friendship was of recent date; that there were many others who knew him much better and would be writing from greater understanding and knowledge. Shahid had decided to shut off these routes while there was still time.

“You must write about me.”

Clear though it was that this imperative would have to be acknowledged, I could think of nothing to say: what are the words in which one promises a friend that one will write about him after his death? Finally, I said, “Shahid, I will; I’ll do the best I can.”

By the end of the conversation I knew exactly what I had to do. I picked up my pen, noted the date, and wrote down everything I remembered of that conversation. This I continued to do for the next few months: it is this record that has made it possible for me to fulfill the pledge I made that day.

I knew Shahid’s work long before I met him. His 1997 collection *The Country without a Post Office* had made a powerful impression on me. His voice was like none I had ever heard before, at once lyrical and fiercely disciplined, engaged and yet deeply inward. Not for him the mock-casual almost prose of so much contemporary poetry: his was a voice that was not ashamed to speak in a bardic register. I could think of no one else who would even conceive of publishing a line like “Mad heart, be brave.”

In 1998 I quoted a line from *The Country without a Post Office* in an article that touched briefly on Kashmir. At the time all I knew about Shahid was that he was from Srinagar and had studied in Delhi. I had been at Delhi University myself, but although our time there had briefly overlapped, we had never met. We had friends in common, however, and one of them put me in touch with Shahid. In 1998 and 1999 we had several conversations on the phone and even met a couple of times. But we were no more than acquaintances until he moved to Brooklyn the next year. Once we were in the same neighborhood, we began to meet for occasional meals and quickly discovered that we had a great deal in common. By this time of course Shahid’s condition was already serious, yet his illness

did not impede the progress of our friendship. We found that we had a huge roster of common friends, in India, America, and elsewhere; we discovered a shared love of *rogan josh*, Roshanara Begum, and Kishore Kumar, a mutual indifference to cricket, and an equal attachment to old Bombay films. Because of Shahid's condition even the most trivial exchanges had a special charge and urgency: the inescapable poignancy of talking about food and half-forgotten figures from the past with a man who knew himself to be dying was multiplied in this instance by the knowledge that this man was also a poet who had achieved greatness—perhaps the only such that I shall ever know as a friend.

Shahid had a sorcerer's ability to transmute the mundane into the magical. Once I accompanied Iqbal, his brother, and Hena, his sister, on a trip to fetch him home from hospital. This was on May 21: by that time he had already been through several unsuccessful operations. Now he was back in hospital to undergo a surgical procedure that was intended to relieve the pressure on his brain. His head was shaved and the shape of the tumor was visible upon his bare scalp, its edges outlined by metal sutures. When it was time to leave the ward a blue-uniformed hospital escort arrived with a wheelchair. Shahid waved him away, declaring that he was strong enough to walk out of the hospital on his own. But he was groggier than he had thought and his knees buckled after no more than a few steps. Iqbal went running off to bring back the wheelchair while the rest of us stood in the corridor, holding him upright. At that moment, leaning against the cheerless hospital wall, a kind of rapture descended on Shahid. When the hospital orderly returned with the wheelchair Shahid gave him a beaming smile and asked where he was from. "Ecuador," the man said, and Shahid clapped his hands gleefully together. "Spanish!" he cried, at the top of his voice. "I always wanted to learn Spanish. Just to read Lorca."

At this the tired, slack-shouldered orderly came suddenly to life. "Lorca? Did you say Lorca?" He quoted a few lines, to Shahid's great delight. "Ah! 'La cinque de la tarde,'" Shahid cried, rolling the syllables gleefully around his tongue. "How I love those words. 'La cinque de la tarde!'" That was how we made our way through the hospital's crowded lobby: with Shahid and the orderly in the vanguard, one quoting snatches of Spanish poetry and the other breaking in from time to time with exultant cries of, "La cinque de la tarde, La cinque de la tarde . . ."

Shahid's gregariousness had no limit: there was never an evening

when there wasn't a party in his living room. "I love it that so many people are here," he told me once. "I love it that people come and there's always food. I love this spirit of festivity; it means that I don't have time to be depressed."

His apartment was a spacious and airy split-level, on the seventh floor of a newly renovated building. There was a cavernous study on the top floor and a wide terrace that provided a magnificent view of the Manhattan skyline, across the East River. Shahid loved this view of the Brooklyn waterfront slipping, like a ghat, into the East River, under the glittering lights of Manhattan.

The journey from the foyer of Shahid's building's to his door was a voyage between continents: on the way up the rich fragrance of *rogan josh* and *haak* would invade the dour, gray interior of the elevator; against the background of the songs and voices that were always echoing out of his apartment, even the ringing of the doorbell had an oddly musical sound. Suddenly Shahid would appear, flinging open the door, releasing a great cloud of *heeng* into the frosty New York air. "Oh, how *nice*," he would cry, clapping his hands, "how *nice* that you've come to see your little Mos-lem!" Invariably, there'd be some half-dozen or more people gathered inside—poets, students, writers, relatives—and in the kitchen someone would always be cooking or making tea. Almost to the very end, even as his life was being consumed by his disease, he was the center of a perpetual carnival, an endless *mela* of talk, laughter, food, and of course, poetry.

No matter how many people there were, Shahid was never so distracted as to lose track of the progress of the evening's meal. From time to time he would interrupt himself to shout directions to whoever was in the kitchen: "Yes, now, add the *dahi* now." Even when his eyesight was failing, he could tell, from the smell alone, exactly which stage the *rogan josh* had reached. And when things went exactly as they should, he would sniff the air and cry out loud, "Ah! Khana ka kya mehek hai!" (Oh, the fragrance!)

Shahid was legendary for his prowess in the kitchen, frequently spending days over the planning and preparation of a dinner party. It was through one such party, given while he was in Arizona, that he met James Merrill, the poet who was to radically alter the direction of his poetry: it was after this encounter that he began to experiment with strict metrical patterns and verse forms such as the canzone and the sestina. No one had a greater influence on Shahid's poetry than James Merrill: indeed, in the poem in which he most

explicitly prefigured his own death, "I Dream I Am at the Ghat of the Only World," he awarded the envoy to Merrill: "SHAHID, HUSH. THIS IS ME, JAMES. THE LOVED ONE ALWAYS LEAVES."

"How did you meet Merrill?" I asked Shahid once.

"I heard he was coming down for a reading and I told the people in charge that I wanted to meet him. They said, 'Then why don't you cook for him?' So I did." Merrill loved the food and on learning that Shahid was moving to Hamilton College in upstate New York, he gave him his telephone number and asked him to call. On the occasion of Shahid's first reading at the Academy of American Poets, Merrill was present: a signal honor considering that he was one of America's best-known poets. "Afterwards," Shahid liked to recall, "everybody rushed up and said, 'Did you know that Jim Merrill was here?' My stock in New York went up a thousandfold that evening."

Shahid placed great store in authenticity and exactitude in cooking and would tolerate no deviation from traditional methods and recipes: for those who took shortcuts, he had only pity. He had a special passion for the food of his region, one variant of it in particular: "Kashmiri food in the pandit style." I asked him once why this was so important to him and he explained that it was because of a recurrent dream, in which all the pandits had vanished from the valley of Kashmir and their food had become extinct. This was a nightmare that haunted him and he returned to it again and again, in his conversation and his poetry.

At a certain point I lost track of you.
You needed me. You needed to perfect me:
In your absence you polished me into the Enemy.
Your history gets in the way of my memory.
I am everything you lost. You can't forgive me.
I am everything you lost. Your perfect enemy.
Your memory gets in the way of my memory . . .

There is nothing to forgive. You won't forgive me.
I hid my pain even from myself; I revealed my pain only to myself.
There is everything to forgive. You can't forgive me.
If only somehow you could have been mine,
what would not have been possible in the world?¹

Once, in conversation, he told me that he also loved Bengali food. I protested: "But Shahid, you've never even been to Calcutta."

"No," he said. "But we had friends who used to bring us that food. When you ate it you could see that there were so many things that you didn't know about, everywhere in the country . . ."

This was at a time when his illness had forced him into spending long periods in bed. He was lying prone on his back, shielding his eyes with his fingers. Suddenly he sat up. "I wish all this had not happened," he said. "This dividing of the country, the divisions between people—Hindu, Muslim, Muslim, Hindu—you can't imagine how much I hate it. It makes me sick. What I say is: why can't you be happy with the cuisines and the clothes and the music and all these wonderful things?" He paused and added softly, "At least here we have been able to make a space where we can all come together because of the good things."

Of the many "good things" in which he took pleasure, none was more dear to him than the music of Begum Akhtar. He had met the great ghazal singer when he was in his teens, through a friend, and she had become an abiding presence and influence in his life. In his apartment there were several shrine-like niches that were filled with pictures of the people he worshipped: Begum Akhtar was one of these, along with his father, his mother, and James Merrill. "I loved Begum Akhtar," he told me once. "In other circumstances you could have said that it was a sexual kind of love—but I don't know what it was. I loved to listen to her, I loved to be with her, I couldn't bear to be away from her. You can imagine what it was like. Here I was in my midteens—just sixteen—and I couldn't bear to be away from her."

It was probably this relationship with Begum Akhtar that engendered his passion for the ghazal as a verse form. Yet, ardent advocate though he was of the form, he had little time for the gushing ardor of some of its contemporary American fans: "Imagine me at a writer's conference where a woman kept saying to me, 'Oh, I just love guh-zaals, I'm gonna write a lot of g'zaaals,' and I said to her, in utter pain, 'OH, PLEASE DON'T!'"² Always the disciplinarian in such matters, he believed that the ghazal would never flourish if its structure were not given due respect: "Some rules of the ghazal are clear and classically stringent. The opening couplet (called *matla*) sets up a scheme (of rhyme—called *qafia*; and refrain—called *radif*) by having it occur in both lines—the

rhyme *immediately* preceding the refrain—and then this scheme occurs only in the second line of each succeeding couplet. That is, once a poet establishes the scheme—with total freedom, I might add—she or he become its slave. What results in the rest of the poem is the alluring tension of a slave trying to master the master.”³ Over a period of several years he took it on himself to solicit ghazals from a number of poets writing in English. The resulting collection, *Ravishing DisUnities: Real Ghazals in English*, was published in 2000. In establishing a benchmark for the form it has already begun to exert a powerful influence: the formalization of the ghazal may well prove to be Shahid’s most important scholarly contribution to the canon of English poetry. His own summation of the project was this: “If one writes in free verse—and one should—to subvert Western civilization, surely one should write in forms to save oneself *from* Western civilization?”⁴

For Shahid, Begum Akhtar was the embodiment of one such form, not just in her music but in many other aspects of her being. An aspect of the ghazal that he greatly prized was the latitude it provided for wordplay, wit, and *nakhra* (affectation). Begum Akhtar was a consummate master of all of these, and Shahid had a fund of stories about her sharpness in repartee. He was himself no mean practitioner of the art of repartee. On one famous occasion, at Barcelona airport, he was stopped by a security guard just as he was about to board a plane. The guard, a woman, asked, “What do you do?”

“I’m a poet,” Shahid answered.

“What were you doing in Spain?”

“Writing poetry.”

No matter what the question, Shahid worked poetry into his answer. Finally, the exasperated woman asked, “Are you carrying anything that could be dangerous to the other passengers?” At this Shahid clapped a hand to his chest and cried, “Only my heart.”

This was one of his great Wildean moments, and it was to occasion the poem “Barcelona Airport.” He treasured these moments: “I long for people to give me an opportunity to answer questions,” he told me once. On May 7 I had the good fortune to be with him when one such opportunity presented itself. Shahid was teaching at Manhattan’s Baruch College in the spring semester of 2000 and this was to be his last class—indeed, the last he was ever to teach. The class was to be a short one, for he had an appointment at the hospital immediately afterward. I had heard a great deal about the bril-

liance of Shahid's teaching, but this was the first and only time that I was to see him perform in a classroom. It was evident from the moment we walked in that the students adored him: they had printed a magazine and dedicated the issue to him. Shahid, for his part, was not in the least subdued by the sadness of the occasion. From beginning to end, he was a sparkling diva, Akhtar incarnate, brimming with laughter and *nakhra*. When an Indian student walked in late he greeted her with the cry "Ah, my little subcontinental has arrived." Clapping his hands, he feigned a swoon. "It stirs such a tide of patriotism in me to behold another South Asian!"

Towards the end of the class, a student asked a complicated question about the difference between plausibility and inevitability in a poem. Shahid's eyebrows arched higher and higher as he listened. At last, unable to contain himself, he broke in. "Oh, you're such a *naughty* boy," he cried, tapping the table with his fingertips. "You always turn *everything* into an abstraction."

But Begum Akhtar was not all wit and *nakhra*: indeed, the strongest bond between Shahid and her was, I suspect, the idea that sorrow has no finer mask than a studied lightness of manner. Shahid often told a story about Begum Akhtar's marriage: although her family's origins were dubious, her fame as a beauty was such that she received a proposal from the scion of a prominent Muslim family of Lucknow. The proposal came with the condition that the talented young singer would give up singing: the man's family was deeply conservative and could not conceive of one of its members performing on stage. Begum Akhtar—or Akhtaribai Faizabadi, as she was then—accepted, but soon afterward her mother died. Heartbroken, Akhtaribai spent her days weeping on her grave. Her condition became such that a doctor had to be brought in to examine her. He said that if she were not allowed to sing she would lose her mind: it was only then that her husband's family relented and allowed her to sing again.

Shahid was haunted by this image of Begum Akhtar as a bereaved and inconsolable daughter, weeping on her mother's grave; it is in this grief-stricken aspect that she is evoked again and again in his poems. The poem that was his farewell to the world, "I Dream I Am at the Ghat of the Only World," opens with an evocation of Begum Akhtar: A night of ghazals comes to an end. The singer departs through her chosen mirror, her one diamond cut on her countless necks. I, as ever, linger.

Shahid was born in New Delhi in 1949. His father's family was from Srinagar in Kashmir. They were Shia, who are a minority among the Muslims of Kashmir. There was a long tradition of education in the family, and Shahid's grandmother was one of the first educated women in Kashmir. Shahid's father, Agha Ashraf Ali, continued the family tradition of public service in education. He taught at Jamia Millia University in New Delhi and went on to become the principal of the Teacher's College in Srinagar. In 1961 he enrolled at Ball State Teacher's College in Muncie, Indiana, to do a PhD in comparative education. Shahid was twelve when the family moved to the United States, and for the next three years he attended school in Muncie. Later the family moved back to Srinagar, and that was where Shahid completed his schooling. But it was because of his early experience, I suspect, that Shahid was able to take America so completely in his stride when he arrived in Pennsylvania as a graduate student. The idea of a cultural divide or conflict had no purchase in his mind: America and India were the two poles of his life and he was at home in both in a way that was utterly easeful and unproblematic.

Shahid took his undergraduate degree at the University of Kashmir, in Srinagar, and went on to Delhi for his MA. His memories of Delhi University were deeply conflicted: he became something of a campus celebrity but also endured rebuffs and disappointments that may well have come his way only because he was a Muslim and a Kashmiri. Although he developed many close and lasting friendships he also suffered many betrayals and much unhappiness. In any event, he was, I think, deeply relieved when Penn State University in College Park, Pennsylvania, offered him a scholarship for a PhD.

His time at Penn State he remembered with unmitigated pleasure: "I grew as a reader, I grew as a poet, I grew as a lover." He fell in with a vibrant group of graduate students, many of whom were Indian. This was, he often said, the happiest time of his life. Later Shahid moved to Arizona to take a degree in creative writing. This in turn was followed by a series of jobs in colleges and universities: Hamilton College, the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, and finally the University of Utah in Salt Lake City, where he was appointed professor in 1999. He was on leave from Utah, doing a brief stint at New York University, when he had his first blackout in February 2000.

After 1975, when he moved to Pennsylvania, Shahid lived mainly in America. His brother was already there and they were later joined by their two sisters. But Shahid's parents continued to live in Srinagar and it was his custom to spend the summer months with them there every year: "I always move in my heart between sad countries."⁵ Traveling between the United States and India he was thus an intermittent but firsthand witness (*sháhíd*) to the mounting violence that seized the region from the late 1980s onward:

*It was '89, the stones were not far, signs
of change everywhere (Kashmir would
soon be in literal flames) . . .*⁶

The steady deterioration of the political situation in Kashmir—the violence and counterviolence—had a powerful effect on him. In time it became one of the central subjects of his work: indeed, it could be said that it was in writing of Kashmir that he created his finest work. The irony of this is that Shahid was not by inclination a political poet. I heard him say once, "If you are from a difficult place and that's all you have to write about then you should stop writing. You have to respect your art, your form—that is just as important as what you write about." Another time, I was present at Shahid's apartment when his long-time friend Patricia O'Neill showed him a couple of sonnets written by a Victorian poet. The poems were political, trenchant in their criticism of the British government for its failure to prevent the massacre of the Armenians in Turkey. Shahid glanced at them and tossed them offhandedly aside: "These are terrible poems." Patricia asked why, and he said, "Look, I already know where I stand on the massacre of the Armenians. Of course I am against it. But this poem tells me nothing of the massacre; it makes nothing of it formally. I might as well just read a news report."

Anguished as he was about Kashmir's destiny, Shahid resolutely refused to embrace the role of victim that could so easily have been his. Had he not done so, he could no doubt have easily become a fixture on talk shows, news programs, and op-ed pages. But Shahid never had any doubt about his calling: he was a poet, schooled in the fierce and unforgiving arts of language. He had no taste for political punditry.

Such as they were, Shahid's political views were inherited largely from his father, whose beliefs were akin to those of most secular, left-leaning Muslim intellectuals of the Nehruvian era. Although

respectful of religion, he remains a firm believer in the separation of politics and religious practice.

Once, when Shahid was at dinner with my family, I asked him bluntly, "What do you think is the solution for Kashmir?" His answer was, "I think ideally the best solution would be absolute autonomy within the Indian Union in the broadest sense." But this led almost immediately to the enumeration of a long list of caveats and reservations: quite possibly, he said, such a solution was no longer possible, given the actions of the Indian state in Kashmir; the extremist groups would never accept the "autonomy" solution in any case and so many other complications had entered the situation that it was almost impossible to think of a solution.

The truth is that Shahid's gaze was not political in the sense of being framed in terms of policy and solutions. In the broadest sense, his vision tended always toward the inclusive and ecumenical, an outlook that he credited to his upbringing. He spoke often of a time in his childhood when he had been seized by the desire to create a small Hindu temple in his room in Srinagar. He was initially hesitant to tell his parents, but when he did they responded with an enthusiasm equal to his own. His mother bought him *murtis* and other accoutrements and for a while he was assiduous in conducting *pujas* at this shrine. This was a favorite story. "Whenever people talk to me about Muslim fanaticism," he said to me once, "I tell them how my mother helped me make a temple in my room. What do you make of that? I ask them." There is a touching evocation of this in his poem "Lenox Hill": *and I, one festival, crowned Krishna by you, Kashmir/ listening to my flute.*

I once remarked to Shahid that he was the closest that Kashmir had to a national poet. He shot back, "A national poet, maybe. But not a *nationalist* poet; please not that." If anything, Kashmir's current plight represented for him the failure of the emancipatory promise of nationhood. In the title poem of *The Country without a Post Office*, a poet returns to Kashmir to find the keeper of a fallen minaret:

"Nothing will remain, everything's finished,"
I see his voice again: "This is a shrine
of words. You'll find your letters to me. And mine
to you. Come soon and tear open these vanished
envelopes." . . .

This is an archive. I've found the remains
of his voice, that map of longings with no limit.⁷

The pessimism engendered by the loss of these ideals—that *map of longings with no limit*—resulted in a vision in which, increasingly, Kashmir became a vortex of images circling around a single point of stillness: the idea of death. In this figuring of his homeland, he himself became one of the images that were spinning around the dark point of stillness—both Sháhíd and Shahíd, witness and martyr—his destiny inextricably linked with Kashmir’s, each pre-figured by the other.

I will die, in autumn, in Kashmir,
and the shadowed routine of each vein
will almost be news, the blood censored, for the *Saffron Sun* and
the *Times of Rain*. . . .

Among my notes is a record of a telephone conversation on May 5. The day before he had gone to the hospital for an important test: a scan that was expected to reveal whether or not the course of chemotherapy that he was then undergoing had had the desired effect. All other alternative therapies and courses of treatment had been put off until this report.

The scan was scheduled for 2:30 in the afternoon. I called his number several times in the late afternoon and early evening—there was no response. I called again the next morning and this time he answered. There were no preambles. He said, “Listen, Amitav, the news is not good at all. Basically they are going to stop all my medicines now—the chemotherapy and so on. They give me a year or less. They’d suspected that I was not responding well because of the way I look. They will give me some radiation a little later. But they said there was not much hope.”

Dazed, staring blankly at my desk, I said, “What will you do now, Shahid?”

“I would like to go back to Kashmir to die.” His voice was quiet and untroubled. “Now I have to get my passport, settle my will and all that. I don’t want to leave a mess for my siblings. But after that I would like to go to Kashmir. It’s still such a feudal system there and there will be so much support—and my father is there too. Anyway, I don’t want my siblings to have to make the journey afterwards, like we had to with my mother.”

Later, because of logistical and other reasons, he changed his mind about returning to Kashmir: he was content to be laid to rest in Northampton, in the vicinity of Amherst, a town sacred to the

memory of his beloved Emily Dickinson. But I do not think it was an accident that his mind turned to Kashmir in speaking of death. Already, in his poetic imagery, death, Kashmir, and Sháhíd/Shahíd had become so closely overlaid as to be inseparable, like old photographs that have melted together in the rain.

Yes, I remember it.
the day I'll die, I broadcast the crimson,

so long ago of that sky, its spread air,
its rushing dyes, and a piece of earth

bleeding, apart from the shore, as we went
on the day I'll die, past the guards, and he,

keeper of the world's last saffron, rowed me
on an island the size of a grave. On

two yards he rowed me into the sunset,
past all pain. On everyone's lips was news

of my death but only that beloved couplet,
broken, on his:

"If there is a paradise on earth,
It is this, it is this, it is this."⁸

Shahid's mother, Sufia Nomani, was from Rudauli in Uttar Pradesh. She was descended from a family that was well-known for its Sufi heritage. Shahid believed that this connection influenced her life in many intangible ways; "she had the grandeur of a Sufi," he liked to say.

Although Shahid's parents lived in Srinagar, they usually spent the winter months in their flat in New Delhi. It was there that his mother had her first seizure in December 1995. The attack was initially misdiagnosed and it was not till the family brought her to New York's Lenox Hill Hospital, in January 1996, that it was confirmed that she had a malignant brain tumor. Her condition was so serious that she was operated on two days after her arrival. The operation did not have the desired effect and resulted instead in a partial paralysis. At the time Shahid and his older brother Iqbal were both teaching at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. His sister, Hena, was working on a PhD at the same institution. The

siblings decided to move their mother to Amherst and it was there that she died on April 24, 1997. In keeping with her wishes, the family took her body back to Kashmir for burial. This long and traumatic journey forms the subject of a cycle of poems, "From Amherst to Kashmir," that was later included in Shahid's 2001 collection *Rooms Are Never Finished*.

During the last phase of his mother's illness and for several months afterward, Shahid was unable to write. The dry spell was broken in 1998, with "Lenox Hill," possibly his greatest poem. The poem was a canzone, a form of unusual rigor and difficulty (the poet Anthony Hecht once remarked that Shahid deserved to be in the Guinness Book of Records for having written three canzones—more than any other poet). In "Lenox Hill" the architectonics of the form create a soaring superstructure, an immense domed enclosure, like that of the great mosque of Isfahan or the mausoleum of Sayyida Zainab in Cairo: a space that seems all the more vast because of the austerity of its proportions. The rhymes and half rhymes are the honeycombed arches that thrust the dome toward the heavens, and the meter is the mosaic that holds the whole in place. Within the immensity of this bounded space, every line throws open a window that beams a shaft of light across continents, from Amherst to Kashmir, from the hospital of Lenox Hill to the Pir Panjal Pass. Entombed at the center of this soaring edifice lies his mother:

. . . Mother, they asked me, *So how's the writing?* I answered *My mother*
is my poem. What did they expect? For no verse
sufficed except the promise, fading, of Kashmir
and the cries that reached you from the cliffs of Kashmir

(across fifteen centuries) in the hospital. *Kashmir,*
she's dying! How her breathing drowns out the universe
as she sleeps in Amherst.

The poem is packed with the devices that he had perfected over a lifetime: rhetorical questions, imperative commands, lines broken or punctuated to create resonant and unresolvable ambiguities. It ends, characteristically, with a turn that is at once disingenuous and wrenchingly direct.

For compared to my grief for you, what are those of Kashmir,
and what (I close the ledger) are the griefs of the universe
when I remember you—beyond all accounting—O my mother?

For Shahid, the passage of time produced no cushioning from the shock of the loss of his mother: he relived it over and over again until the end. Often he would interrupt himself in midconversation: "I can't believe she's gone; I still can't believe it." The week before his death, on waking one morning, he asked his family where his mother was and whether it was true that she was dead. On being told that she was, he wept as though he were living afresh through the event.

In the penultimate stanza of "Lenox Hill," in a heart-stopping inversion, Shahid figures himself as his mother's mother:

"As you sit here by me, you're just like my mother,"
she tells me. I imagine her: a bride in Kashmir,
she's watching at the Regal, her first film with Father.
If only I` could gather you in my arms, Mother,
I'd save you—now my daughter—from God. The universe
opens its ledger. I write: How helpless was God's mother!

I remember clearly the evening when Shahid read this poem in the living room of my house. I remember it because I could not keep myself from wondering whether it was possible that Shahid's identification with his mother was so powerful as to spill beyond the spirit and into the body. Brain cancer is not, so far as I know, a hereditary disease, yet his body had, as it were, elected to reproduce the conditions of his mother's death. But how could this be possible? Even the thought appears preposterous in the bleak light of the Aristotelian distinction between mind and body, and the notions of cause and effect that flow from it. Yet there are traditions in which poetry is a world of causality entire unto itself, where metaphor extends beyond the mere linking of words, into the conjugation of a distinctive reality.

Shahid thought of his work as being placed squarely within a modern Western tradition. Yet the mechanics of his imagination—dreams, visions, an overpowering sense of identity with those he loved—as well as his life, and perhaps even his death, were fashioned by a will that owed more perhaps to the Sufis and the Bhakti poets than to the modernists. In his determination to be not just a writer of poetry but an embodiment of his poetic vision, he was, I think, more the heir of Rumi and Kabir than Eliot and Merrill.

The last time I saw Shahid was on the twenty-seventh of October, at his brother's house in Amherst. He was intermittently able to

converse and there were moments when we talked just as we had in the past. He was aware, as he had long been, of his approaching end and he had made his peace with it. I saw no trace of anguish or conflict: surrounded by the love of his family and friends, he was calm, contented, at peace. He had said to me once, “I love to think that I’ll meet my mother in the afterlife, if there is an afterlife.” I had the sense that as the end neared, this was his supreme consolation. He died peacefully, in his sleep, at 2:00 a.m. on December 8.

Now, in his absence, I am amazed that so brief a friendship has resulted in so vast a void. Often, when I walk into my living room, I remember his presence there, particularly on the night when he read us his farewell to the world: “I Dream I Am at the Ghat of the Only World.” I remember how he created a vision of an evening of ghazals, drawing to its end, of the be-diamonded singer vanishing through a mirror; I remember him evoking the voices he loved—of Begum Akhtar, Eqbal Ahmed, and James Merrill—urging him on as he journeyed toward his mother: *love doesn’t help anyone finally survive*. Shahid knew exactly how it would end and he was meticulous in saying his farewells, careful in crafting the envoy to the last verses of his own life.

Notes

1. From Agha Shahid Ali, “Farewell,” in *The Country without a Post Office* (New York: W.W. Norton, , 1997), 22–23.
2. Agha Shahid Ali, introduction to *Ravishing DisUnities: Real Ghazals in English*, ed. Agha Shahid Ali (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2000), 1.
3. *Ibid.*, 3.
4. *Ibid.*, 13.
5. Agha Shahid Ali, “I Dream I Am at the Ghat of the Only World,” in *Rooms Are Never Finished* (New York: Norton, 2001).
6. Agha Shahid Ali, “Summers of Translation,” in *Rooms Are Never Finished*.
7. Agha Shahid Ali, “The Country without a Post Office,” in *The Country without a Post Office* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), 48–51.
8. From Agha Shahid Ali, “The Last Saffron,” in *Country without a Post Office*.

PATRICIA O'NEILL WITH REID LARSON

An Introduction to *The Beloved Witness Project*
and a Selected Bibliography of Agha Shahid
Ali's Publications in India and America,
1972–2001

*They ask me to tell them what Shahid means: Listen, listen:
It means "The Belovéd" in Persian, "witness" in Arabic.
—AGHA SHAHID ALI, "IN ARABIC"*

The Beloved Witness Project is a digital humanities project at Hamilton College. Agha Shahid Ali's sister, Professor Hena Ahmad (Truman State University), and Professor Patricia O'Neill (Hamilton College) are building a digital archive based on the papers, letters, manuscripts, and other artifacts donated by Iqbal Agha Ali and the Agha Shahid Ali Literary Trust to Hamilton College's Special Collections Department in Burke Library. We are committed to preserving the manuscripts and papers of Agha Shahid Ali and also to keeping his work and ideas alive for future poets and global audiences. As a poet and teacher, Shahid employed the many meanings of the poet's address to the "beloved." From Western poetic traditions he drew on the longings of a lover, and from Eastern traditions he voiced the political longings of poets such as Faiz Ahmed Faiz. Shahid's approach to poetry and poetics thus informs an essential part of the discipline of the humanities in our day, and we hope the archive will promote Shahid's ideal to bear "witness" to a world of lost tribes, of political and ethnic conflicts, of the pain of exile, and of the possibility for transformation and reconciliation.

The initial idea to create a bibliography of Shahid's journal publications came from the fact that Shahid's resume was organized in a peculiar way at the time of his death. From the time that Shahid arrived at Hamilton College after completing his MFA at the University of Arizona in 1987, he announced his goal to be published in journals whose titles would start with every letter of the alphabet.

So the last resume we have lists his published poems in alphabetical order by the journal title, beginning with *Acumen* (May 1997), 56: “Ghazal,” and ending with *Zidne Novine* (August/September 1996, published in Sarajevo), 15: “Dopisnik,” a translation of “The Correspondent,” by Ferida Durakovic. The only letters not represented are *e*, *r*, and *u*. This idiosyncratic method of detailing his publications provides an interesting anecdote about Shahid’s character and attitude toward his career as a poet. However, it seemed important to create a chronologically organized bibliography to provide insight and guidance for an understanding of his poetic development.

The bibliography that follows was compiled from database sources and print copies of the original journals that are part of the Agha Shahid Ali Collection. We have included his books, essays, and interviews as well as the journal publications of his poems, but not his many individual translations of poems by Faiz, nor, with a couple of exceptions, did we include poems reprinted in nearly one hundred anthologies of various kinds. Shahid’s work as a translator is very important, and his thinking about translation is recorded in his essays and interviews. We have focused instead on his original works because there are often substantial differences between the journal versions of Shahid’s poems and the version that appears in the book volumes. It was Shahid’s practice to continue to revise his poems even after journal publication. Once his poems were printed in book collections, however, they remained unchanged and were simply reproduced in anthologies. Given that practice, this bibliography provides a useful guide to scholars who want to see how certain poems evolved from their earliest publication until their final form in the volumes that established Shahid’s reputation as a preeminent poet in America and the “beloved witness” from Kashmir to many readers on the subcontinent and elsewhere. We may still find more poems in magazines and newspapers as we work through the materials now preserved in the Agha Shahid Ali archive, but we believe this is a nearly complete record of Shahid’s poetry in journal publications.

While digitalization of Shahid’s manuscripts and the many letters written between Shahid and his family, friends, and fellow poets will be invaluable to our understanding of Shahid’s personal and poetic concerns, we can begin to see how Shahid’s understanding of his craft and his role as a transnational poet writing in English evolved by comparing the first publication of a poem—such as “Postcard from Kashmir”—to its final version published in *The*

Half-Inch Himalayas (1987). The use of journal publications to test ideas or experiment with style and form of address is not uncommon among poets. But in the case of Shahid, there is an additional significance to his revisions when they reflect changes in his point of view or attitude toward his homeland and the relations of his art to the three cultural traditions he claimed for himself: Hindu, Muslim, and Western.

We know from manuscripts of "Postcard from Kashmir" that the poem had gone through multiple revisions before it appeared in print in a small anthology entitled *How Strong the Roots: Poems of Exile* (ed. Sergeant, 1981), which was published in London. There Shahid's poem is curiously included in a section entitled "To This Country I Have Come—This Is My Home: Poems by Exiles Living in Britain Dealing with Their Experiences and Thoughts of Home, Family and Ancestors." Although Shahid had visited Britain for a short time as a child, he was never a resident. One suspects, however, that even before he became known in the West, Shahid was gathering admirers, and clearly the theme of the poem was relevant. There are no contributors' notes, so the poem appears with just Shahid's name and his country: India. As Rebecca Walkowitz has suggested with regard to Caryl Phillips, the way a writer locates himself over time through contributor notes creates an interesting narrative of migration and identity that most often transcends national origins.¹ In Shahid's case, his designation as a writer from India is certainly complicated by the poem "Postcard from Kashmir," and in later publications we see that Shahid's biographical note eschews national identity, beginning most often with the fact that Shahid was born in Delhi and grew up in Kashmir.

"Postcard from Kashmir" is of particular interest to students of Shahid's work because it is one of many poems referring to correspondence and long-distance communications between Shahid and his family, his friends, and his compatriots. Such poems punctuate his literary career and mark Shahid as a poet of exile. Letters and postcards and also the telephone are the material means of keeping in "touch," an irony that Shahid delighted in exploiting in his parodies of Bell Telephone's advertisements in his chapbook *A Walk through the Yellow Pages* (1987). In "Postcard from Kashmir" the speaker's reflections on a picture postcard of the highest mountains in the world underscore the sense of incongruity and discontinuity between the exile's physical reality and his emotional state of being. Irony and its effects on the speaker remain in the poem's final ver-

sion in *The Half-Inch Himalayas*, but a significant change in Shahid's approach to poetry and to his position as a poet of exile appears when we consider that Shahid deleted the final stanza of the poem in its final version.

In the earlier publication, the fifth line of the poem makes explicit reference to Srinagar, the poet's hometown. This reference introduces the idea of place rather than geography, which is the focus of the photograph on the postcard. At the end of the poem, after the image of memory as "a giant negative, black / and white, still undeveloped," a message, presumably written on the back of the postcard, introduces the speaker's family:

"Things here are as usual—though
we always talk of you.
The snow isn't melting,
we're scared of another drought.
And we're waiting for your return,
and for the almond blossoms
and, if God wills, some early saffron.
Waiting for you is like waiting for Spring.
We all send our love."

This stanza individualizes the circumstances and character of the speaker. It suggests that whereas the speaker claimed that the postcard represented the great distance between himself and his home, the message suggests that his return is happily anticipated by his family, who write without anxiety about the matter. The repetition of "and" through several lines makes that return as predictable as the seasons'. Between Shahid's first years of living in America, when the poem was conceived, and his successful publication of *The Half-Inch Himalayas*, however, it seems that he was already moving beyond the narrow if intense subjectivity of his experience of migration toward the fuller, surer poetic voice of one who speaks directly to the situation of exile.

If the idea of exile seems too extreme to describe this speaker's feelings of displacement, we can hear in the line "this is the closest I'll ever be to home" the foreboding, if not the actual knowledge, that there is no possibility of return. Tracing the deletion of the final stanza of "Postcard from Kashmir" offers evidence of the poet's evolving recognition of his fate and throws emphasis on the one resource that sustains the exile's connection with home. If the glossy

color photograph of Kashmir is obviously fake and inadequate as a representation of home, there is still the speaker's memory. Memory of home, not an actual return, is anticipated through the speaker's reference to the present as a "giant negative" of "still undeveloped" images. Developing those images will not only provide some continuity with home but also potentially create a truer and more powerful evocation of home than the postcard he holds in his hand. In other words, by deleting the last stanza, the poet transforms his poetic vision from mere nostalgia for the past into a productive longing for the future. This important transformation or fusion of nostalgia with irrepressible longing is one of the hallmarks of Shahid's oeuvre.

There are many more thought-provoking discoveries to be made from comparing early and late versions of poems and from considering why some poems were not collected or not published in India or only in India. For many scholars and readers, Shahid's translations of the poems of Faiz Ahmad Faiz are among his best work. Yet Shahid's understanding of his role as translator also evolved. In some publications, he is not even acknowledged as the translator, in others he calls his work an "adaptation." Eventually Shahid's skill as a poet triumphed over concern with a literal translation of Faiz's words. He embraced the idea that the "beloved" might also refer to one's country and to the exile's sometimes unrequited and always difficult relations with the homeland.

During the same years that Shahid was involved in conveying the tone and nuances of Faiz into English, he became insistent that writers in English adopt the "true form" of the ghazal. The evolution of Shahid's investment in the ghazal is apparent in his essays and interviews. Shahid's final volume, *Call Me Ishmael Tonight*, published posthumously, is a collection of his ghazals and includes the only examples of poems revised even after appearing in a book form. Working within the structures of poetic forms, including the demands of the villanelle and the canzone, Shahid had been able to protest the sufferings of Kashmir and mourn the loss of his mother with great emotional effect and poetic authority. But Shahid's defense and practice of the ghazal also brought together the forms, symbols, and myths of East and West with an elegant inventiveness that includes, as this bibliography makes clear, a new sense of literary history: a culturally global history of transnational, multilingual, and internationally beloved poets.

For younger poets as well as experienced readers, we hope this introduction and bibliography will contribute to a better understanding of the growth of this poet's mind and the particular strategies he employed for reaching audiences across continents and cultures.

Selected Works of Agha Shahid Ali

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(1971) *Quest* 73: 100. "Bones"
(1973) *Opinion* 1: 56. "Thumri for Rasoolan Bai"
(1973) *Quest* 83: 42. "The Walled City"
(1974) *Journal of Indian Writing in English* 2.1: 36–37. "Return to Srinagar"
(1974) *Quest* 91: 61–62. "Introducing"; "War-Landscape"
(1975) *Ariel* 6.4: 39–40. "Building Furniture"
(1975) *Creative Moment & Poetry Eastwest* 8: 7. "The Walled City"
(1975) *Malahat Review* 36: 58–59. "Evening in the Asylum"
(1975) *Quest* 96: 37–38. "Qawwali at Nizamuddin Aulia's Dargah"
(1975) *Soliloquy* Jan.–Mar. 1975: 1–6. "The Walled City: 7 Poems on Delhi"; "Survival Notes"
(1975) *Soliloquy* July–Sept. 1975: 8–12. "The Lull"; "Autobiographies—IV"; "Autobiographies—V"; "Shaving"
(1978) *Pivot* 7.29a: 177. "The Editor Revisited"

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- (1979) *Fiddlehead* 122: 63. “Snowmen”
- (1979) *Greenfield Review* 7.3–4: 169–70. “The Poet as Refugee”; “The Butcher”
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- (1980) *Carleton Miscellany* 18.2: 94–95. “To the Painter”
- (1980) *Chandrabhaga* 3: 33–35. “Cracked Ancestors”
- (1980) *Chariton Review* 6.2: 47. “A Butcher”
- (1980) *Kunapipi* 2.2: 104–6. “The Snow Kali”; “After Seeing Kozintsev’s ‘King Lear’ in Delhi”; “Birthday Poem”
- (1980) *Pivot* 8.30: 66. “An Immigrant”; “No”
- (1980–81) *Greensboro Review* 29: 54. “Of Houses”
- (1981) *International Poetry Review* 7.2: 112. “No”
- (1981) *John O’Hara Journal* 4.2: 44–45. “Grandfather Clock”
- (1981) *Pivot* 8.31: 97. “Concubine of Snow”
- (1981) *Poem* 43: 31–32. “The Previous Occupant”; “Flight from Houston in January”
- (1982) *Columbia* 7: 91–92. “Medusa”
- (1982) *Greenfield Review* 10.1–2: 94–96. “Bones”; “A Footnote to History”
- (1982) *Liberal Arts Faculty Newsletter* [Pennsylvania State University] 13: 8. “At the Museum”
- (1982) *Missouri Review* 6.1: 22–24. “An Interview with Red Riding Hood, Now No Longer Little”; “The Wolf’s Postscript to ‘Little Red Riding Hood’”
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- (1984) *Agni* 21: 30–31. “The Season of the Plains”
- (1984) *Crazyhorse* 27: 18–21. “A Lost Memory of Delhi”; “The Dacca Gauzes”
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- (1985) *Cimarron Review* 70: 53. “A Call”
- (1985) *Prickly Pear/Tucson* 3.1–2: 24–28. “The Snow Kali”; “Leaving Your City”; “A Wrong Turn”
- (1985) *Quarterly West* 21: 72–73. “Memoir”
- (1985) *Webster Review* 9.2: 75–76. “The Poverty of Greens”; “A Dream of Drowning”
- (1985) *Willow Springs* 16: 39–42. “Homage to Faiz Ahmed Faiz”
- (1986) *Interim* 5.1: 37–38. “Hansel’s Game”; “The Tourist”
- (1986) *Literary Review* 29.3: 361. “The Rain of Stones”; “Solitude”
- (1986) *Quarterly West* 23: 73–77. “Snowmen”; “I Dream It Is Afternoon When I Return to Delhi”; “Story of a Silence”

- (1986) *Shenandoah* 36.2: 66. "Houses"
- (1987) *Chelsea* 46: 186–89. "The Tiger at 4 A.M."; "Stationery"; "A Wrong Turn"; "Desert Landscape"; "Palm Reading"
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- (1987) *Sonora Review* 12: 7–9. "The Youngest of the Graeae"; "Death Row"
- (1988) *Paris Review* 107: 202–5. "Snow on the Desert."
- (1988) *Quarterly West* 26: 115. "Evening in the Asylum"
- (1988–89) *Massachusetts Review* 29.4: 717–20. "I Dream I Return to Tucson in the Monsoons"
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- (1989) *Libas International* 2.2: 107. "Medusa"
- (1989) *Libas International* 2.3: 107. "Eurydice"; "At the Museum"
- (1989) *Nimrod* 33.1: 139–40. "A Last Speaker"
- (1989) *Quarterly West* 28: 86–88. "Leaving Sonora"; "Photograph in Sedona"
- (1989) *Virginia Quarterly Review* 65.4: 654–56. "Crucifixion"
- (1990) *Antioch Review* 48.4: 487. "Beyond the Ash Rains"
- (1990) *Arc* 25: 47–50. "Eurydice"; "Death Row"; "No"
- (1990) *Field* 43: 83–84. "Exit to Calcutta"
- (1990) *New Myths/MSS* 1.1: 135–36. "I Dream I Return to Tucson in the Monsoons"; "Electric Chair"
- (1990) *Poetry* 156.1: 34. "At the Museum"
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- (1991) *Field* 44: 47–49. "I See Chile in My Rearview Mirror"
- (1991) *Grand Street* 39: 97–98. "Ghazal" (Arabic)
- (1991) *Kashmir Diary* 1.2: 18. "Postcard from Kashmir"
- (1991) *Paris Review* 120: 118–20. "A Nostalgist's Map of America"
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- (1992) *Graham House Review* 16: 21. "Clipper Class Travel"
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- (1994–95) *Graham House Review* 18: 94–97. "Kashmir without a Post Office"
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- (1995) *Yale Review* 83.2: 93. "Muharram in Srinagar, 1992"
- (1995–96) *TriQuarterly*: 176–79. "A Fate's Brief Memoir"
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- (1996) *Brown Critique* 13–15: 3–4. "A Pastoral"
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- (1996) *Massachusetts Review* 37.2: 308. "Ghazal" (tonight)

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Notes

1. Rebecca L. Walkowitz, "The Location of Literature: The Transnational Book and the Migrant Writer," *Contemporary Literature* 47.4 (Winter 2006): 535.

Contributors

Agha Shahid Ali (1949–2001) was the author of seven acclaimed books of poetry, collected in *The Veiled Suite*, as well as several earlier books published in India. He was a finalist for the National Book Award in Poetry in 2001 and the recipient of fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Guggenheim Foundation. He taught at Hamilton College, University of Massachusetts in Amherst, the University of Utah, and New York University. He was a major proponent of formal approaches to poetry and of the ghazal in English. He edited a collection of these, entitled *Ravishing Dis-Unities: Real Ghazals in English*.

Kazim Ali is the author of many books of poetry, fiction, essays, and criticism, including *Sky Ward* (Wesleyan University Press, 2013) and *Resident Alien: On Border-crossing and the Undocumented Divine* (University of Michigan Press, 2015). He is also the editor of *Jean Valentine: This-World Company* and translator of books by Sohrab Sepehri, Marguerite Duras, and Ananda Devi. He is an associate professor of creative writing and comparative literature at Oberlin College.

Dur e Aziz Amna received a degree in English from Yale College with a focus on colonial and postcolonial literature. Her work has appeared in the *Annual of Urdu Studies* and the *Columbia Journal of Literary Criticism*. She currently lives in New York City.

Rita Banerjee is the executive director of Kundiman, the creative director of the Cambridge Writers' Workshop, and a visiting professor of creative writing at Fordham University. She received her doctorate in comparative literature from Harvard and her MFA in creative writing from the University of Washington. Her first collection of poems, *Cracklers at Night* (Finishing Line Press), received First Honorable Mention for Best Poetry Book of 2011–2012 at the Los

Angeles Book Festival, and her novella, *A Night with Kali*, is forthcoming from Spider Road Press

Reginald Dwayne Betts is a writer and poet. Four Way Books will publish his latest collection of poems, *Bastards of the Reagan Era*. His first collection of poems, *Shahid Reads His Own Palm*, won the Beatrice Hawley Award. Betts's memoir, *A Question of Freedom: A Memoir of Learning, Survival, and Coming of Age in Prison*, was the recipient of the 2010 NAACP Image Award for nonfiction. His writing has also led to a Soros Justice Fellowship, a Radcliffe Fellowship, a Ruth Lily Fellowship, and a Pushcart Prize. In addition to his writing, Mr. Betts serves as the national spokesperson for the Campaign for Youth Justice and was appointed to the Coordinating Council of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention by President Barack Obama. He is currently a student at Yale Law School.

Stephen Burt is professor of English at Harvard and the author of several books of poetry and literary criticism, including, most recently, *The Poem Is You: Sixty Contemporary American Poems and How to Read Them* (Harvard University Press 2016). A new book of Stephen's own poetry will appear from Graywolf in late 2017.

Abin Chakraborty is currently teaching as an assistant professor in the Department of English in Chandernagore College, West Bengal, India. His articles have been published in several national and international journals and he has also participated in several conferences in India and the UK. He is also the coeditor of *Uneven Terrains: Critical Perspectives in Postcolonialism*.

Amitav Ghosh was born in Calcutta and grew up in India, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. He studied in Delhi, Oxford, and Alexandria and is the author of *The Circle of Reason*, *The Shadow Lines*, *In an Antique Land*, *Dancing in Cambodia*, *The Calcutta Chromosome*, *The Glass Palace*, *The Hungry Tide*, *Sea of Poppies*, and most recently, *River of Smoke* (2011), which is the second volume of a projected series of novels, the Ibis Trilogy.

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Raza Ali Hasan is the author of three books of poetry, *Grieving Shias* (Sheep Meadow Press, 2006), *67 Mogul Miniatures* (Autumn House Press, 2009) and *Sorrows of the Warrior Class* (Sheep Meadow Press, 2015). He is originally from Pakistan and came to America in 1991. He received his MFA from Syracuse University. He currently teaches in the English Department at the University of Colorado at Boulder.

Shadab Zeest Hashmi is the author of *Kohl & Chalk* and *Baker of Tarifa*. She has won the San Diego Book Award for poetry and the Nazim Hikmet Poetry Prize and has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize multiple times.

Syed Humayoun earned his PhD from Aligarh Muslim University, India and is currently teaching as an Assistant Professor in the Department of English at Budgam Degree College, Kashmir. His articles have been published in several national and international journals. He has translated many poems from Keshur (Kashmiri) and Urdu into English and English poems into Keshur.

Reid Larson is a research and digital initiatives librarian at Burke Library, Hamilton College.

Ada Limón is the author of four books of poetry including, *Bright Dead Things*, which was named a finalist for the 2015 National Book Award in Poetry, a finalist for the 2015 National Book Critics Circle Award, and one of the Top Ten Poetry Books of the Year by the *New York Times*.

Christopher Merrill's recent books include *Boat* (poetry), *Necessities* (prose poetry), and *The Tree of the Doves: Ceremony, Expedition, War* (nonfiction). He directs the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa. His work has been translated into nearly forty languages, and he has conducted cultural diplomacy missions to more than fifty countries.

Mihaela Moscaliuc is the author of *Father Dirt* (Alice James Books, 2010) and *Immigrant Model* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015) and the translator of Carmelia Leonte's *The Hiss of the Viper* (Carnegie Mellon UP, 2014). She is an assistant professor of English at Monmouth University.

Amy Newman's most recent book of poetry is *On This Day in Poetry History* (Persea, 2015). Her other books include *Dear Editor* (2011), *fall* (2004), *Camera Lyrica* (1999), and *Order, or Disorder* (1995). She teaches at Northern Illinois University.

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